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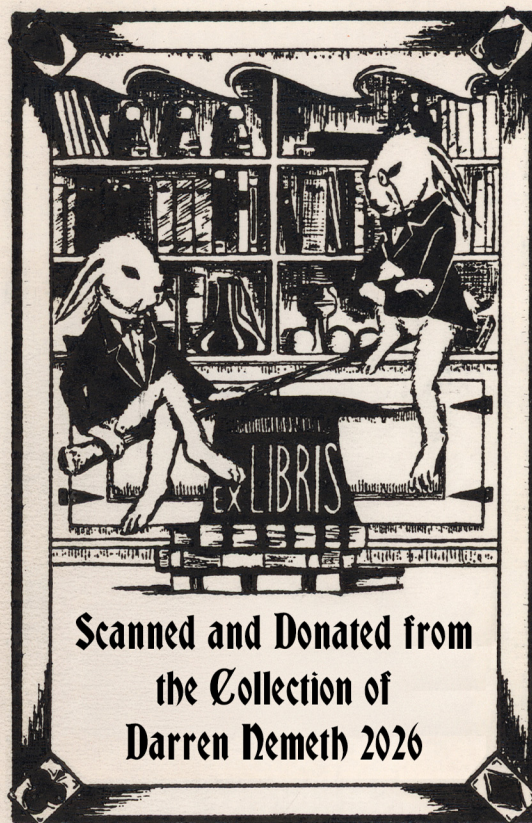
No. 171

Price 5 cents



The
ARTHUR WESTBROOK
Company
CLEVELAND
U. S. A.

by
"OLD
SLEUTH"



OLD SLEUTH WEEKLY

A Series of
THE MOST THRILLING DETECTIVE STORIES
EVER PUBLISHED

No. 171

THE ARTHUR WESTBROOK COMPANY, CLEVELAND, U. S. A.
Published Weekly. By Subscription, \$2.50 per year; \$1.25 for 6 months.

Vol. IV

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THE NEEDLE'S POINT, OR The Carnival of Crime BY "OLD SLEUTH"

PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS IN THIS STORY.

OLD SLEUTH.—Who needs no introduction.
ROGER BISSELL.—A retired merchant who meets sudden death.
DICK DUNCAN.—His nephew.
MURIEL DUNCAN.—His niece.
COUNT OLAF.—A Russian patriot.
DR. IVAN HOFKY.—A great healer.
COUNTESS RITZKIE.—A beautiful woman laboring in the cause of unhappy Russia, but who becomes involved in a great crime.

BARON NITZE.—A patriot.
HOWARD PROCTOR.—The family lawyer.
HARTFORD EDSON.—A splendid but poor young man in love with Muriel.
PROFESSOR MOSKOWSKY.—An artist and a member of the Secret Board of Nihilists.
DR. FORBES.—Family physician to the Bissell and Duncans.

CHAPTER I.

THE OATH OF ALLEGIANCE.

"The penalty is death!"

The speaker, a tall bearded man had risen from his chair and with his burning eyes fixed on the half dozen men gathered about a table in a low-ceilinged, smoky room on the east side, uttered the startling words. They did not appear to be startling words to the other stern-faced men there. They appeared on the contrary, to take the words as a matter of course.

"The penalty is death!" they answered in chorus.

"It is death, it is the end. All traitors to the cause of a new Russia shall likewise suffer. I drink to the cause of a new Russia."

Professor Moskowsky, artist, patriot, raised the glass to his lips, elevating his eyes toward the smoky

ceiling of the room for a brief instant, then tossed off the liquor at one gulp.

The others of his companions did the same, drinking in silence, after which they placed their glasses on the table and leaned back expectantly.

The professor cleared his throat, the others holding him steadily with their burning eyes.

"The Holy Six have been ordered to gather here this evening for a purpose, as each of you is well aware."

The men nodded.

"It is true that you are not aware of the nature of the matter on which you have been summoned. It is my privilege to tell you. A friend—a friend of our cause has arrived in New York, a man from whom great things are expected and whom each member of our Order will be required to swear fealty—to defend

with his life if need be. I may say that this new friend comes recommended from those in high places, the highest in Russia. He is known personally by few. The nature of his work for the order makes it impossible for his identity to our cause to be known generally. To do so would be to defeat the work he has undertaken."

"What is the work of this great patriot, may I ask?" questioned one of the party.

"The question is a proper one. The work of this patriot is that most necessary one, the raising of vast sums of money to carry out our work. Little can be done without power and money is power, greater than all other power. Money speaks in tones of thunder, hence our new found friend's voice could be heard from the mountaintop, will be heard from the highest peaks of the universe. The Baron Nitze will tell you that for which you have gathered here. He is in possession of all the facts and will narrate such as are necessary for the purposes of this small body of men whose works are being felt to the uttermost ends of the earth. Baron, we await your pleasure."

One of the party rose. He was slight, pale-faced man with regular and refined features, one whom a casual observer would at once say was a student and a timid man. As a matter of fact, Baron Nitze possessed a will of iron and a cool daring found in few men in these latter days.

The baron rose, a faint smile illumining his pale features as he permitted his eyes to travel slowly over the upturned faces of his companions.

"Friends and brothers," he began in slow, measured tones, "our brother, Professor Moskowsky, has introduced the subject in question much better than I could hope to. It were right that the information should come from him at first hand were it not for one fact. That is that our new friend has been consigned to me. I am to stand sponsor for him, I am to assist in all ways and manner in the work he is here to perform, being the raising of funds and the furthering of our cause in any other manner that may seem wise."

"Has the new brother arrived?" asked a voice.

"He has."

"Where is he?"

"That you will learn in due time, for each of you shall see him at the proper moment."

"In what manner does he propose to raise money, by popular subscription?"

"The brother's methods are his own. It is not for us to question. He will make known to us such facts as he deems wise for us to possess. The powers at home in our unhappy country have charged me to impress upon the brotherhood that the orders of this man must be obeyed even unto the death. The penalty as you have yourselves spoken, is death!"

"The penalty is death!" repeated the little assemblage.

"The penalty of indiscriminate talk is the same. Were this man's true motive to be known, the spies of Russia would find means to put him in a position where his life would quickly pay the forfeit. Therefore, you will understand how necessary is the utmost secrecy."

"Will these facts be made known to the entire membership of our order?"

"In general, yes. In detail, only to the Secret Board as gathered here tonight."

"When does his work commence?"

"It may have begun already. We do not know. It is possible that this patriot may have been in this free country much longer than we dream. We do not know, it is not for us to inquire into his affairs. As already said, he will acquaint us with such facts as he deems wise. We have decided that he shall have an office or headquarters where we may receive communications from him either directly or by second hand, probably the latter for the sake of safety. Professor Moskowsky has agreed to attend to these details—"

"They already are attended to," spoke up the professor without looking up from a sheet of paper that he was idly sketching upon.

"That is good, then we shall have favorable report to make to our brother when he sees fit to favor us with his presence."

"When?" demanded a brother.

"We know not. It may be soon, it may be days. He will suit his own pleasure."

"Will he know whereof to look?"

"Trust a brother to find a brother. Yes, he will find when he is ready."

"Will funds be necessary?" asked Professor Moskowsky.

"Perhaps, though the probabilities are not. This brother, according to my understanding is well able to support himself while engaged in our noble work. Besides this he is able to add thousands to the cause of our afflicted people, downtrodden by traitors and—"

"Death to the traitors!" chorused the members of the Secret Board.

"So say we all of us," answered the Baron making the sign of a cross on his breast and bowing low with the movement.

Baron Nitze suddenly lifted his right hand as a signal for silence. The members of the Board became suddenly rigid.

"There is an alarm at the outer door," announced Professor Moskowsky without raising his eyes from the sketch that he was making.

"The sentinel will attend to the alarm," commanded the Professor, still busily engaged with his artistic effort.

The sentinel went away to perform his duty. He returned soon thereafter bearing a card which he laid

down before the Professor, who at present was the senior member of the Secret Board.

The Professor started ever so little when he read the name on the card, then handed the slip of pasteboard to Baron Nitze.

"It is for you, Baron," he said languidly.

No sooner had the Baron comprehended the writing on the card than he flushed, then stepped from the room hastily, the others remaining silent with that wonderful stoicism that patriots learn to adopt.

Moments followed, then the Baron returned. He was not alone. All eyes were instantly turned upon his companion. The man was a stranger to the members of the Secret Board. Not one of them ever remembered to have seen him before, nor had they the least idea who he might be.

At a sign from Professor Moskowsky the members rose, making the sign of the cross on their breasts. This was answered by the same signal from the newcomer, made in a quick, almost imperceptible and nervous manner.

"Gentlemen and brothers," announced Baron Nitze. "It is my honor to present to you Count Olaf, the high and mighty brother of whom you have heard for the first time this evening. Swear by the usual sign, your fealty to the great patriot who has come out from Holy Russia that Holy Russia may be saved."

"We swear," answered the Secret Board, making the motion of a dagger being plunged into the heart. "We swear by the blood of our murdered brothers."

CHAPTER II.

DEATH HOVERS NEAR.

A man lay pale and motionless on a bed in a luxurious home in upper New York. Roger Bissell, rated as being one of the wealthiest retired merchants in the Metropolis had been ill but a week. At first his trouble was not thought to be anything more than a trivial ailment.

Mr. Bissell's nephew Dick Duncan and the latter's sister Muriel, both of whom lived with the sick man, were of the opinion from the first that the merchant's trouble was more serious than even he dreamed.

The family doctor was called. He diagnosed the case as a slight fever, perhaps contracted by Mr. Bissell during a recent visit to Cuba to look after some sugar interests of his own down there, that he still maintained control over.

Dick persisted as did Muriel. They were not satisfied with the diagnosis of their uncle. The latter grew continually worse until at last the family physician Dr. Forbes, began to feel alarmed.

"I think," he said, as the three stood looking down upon the pale face of the sick man, "that we had best have counsel. Is there any one whom you would prefer?"

"I know of no one," answered Muriel tearfully. "Surely you should know the best in your profession. I do not mean any disrespect to you in speaking thusly. You know what I mean?"

"Yes, I understand. Two heads frequently are better than one, my child. There is a man in New York at present, who is said to lead his profession. He is a specialist in febrile cases and—"

"What is his name?" interrupted Richard Duncan.

"Professor Ivan Hofsky, a chancellor of the Imperial Russian University."

"Ah, yes, I have heard of him," nodded Dick.

"He is a great man, you say?" questioned Muriel.

"So it is said. I have never met the gentleman."

"Send for him, for—"

"His fees are very high," warned the doctor. "I understand that he never visits a patient at the patient's house short of least a two hundred dollar fee."

"Money is no object in this sad case, sir," answered Richard. "Shall you make the request or shall I attend to that?"

"It were better coming from me, Dick."

"Very well, then I shall leave the matter in your hands, but do not delay. My uncle, in my opinion, is a very sick man. He has been delirious for twenty-four hours now and the fever is burning him up."

"Strange," muttered the physician. "He surely should rally under the treatment. The disease baffles me, it baffles all the remedies known to my school of medicine. Here, I will write a brief note to the Professor if you will be good enough to have one of your uncle's servants undertake the delivery."

"It shall have prompt attention, you may be sure," answered young Duncan, as the Doctor sat down scribbling off a few lines on a prescription pad.

"There, I think that will be sufficient provided we are fortunate enough to reach the professor. I have told him that I shall wait here until he arrives, providing he can come at once. If not he is to let me hear from him by telephone."

Richard Duncan lost no time in sending a servant away with the message to the noted Doctor. In the meantime, Dr. Forbes had his patient sponged with alcohol, thus reducing the temperature slightly for the time being. Half an hour later the temperature had risen even higher than before, much to his alarm.

The physician was plainly puzzled. He had never been called to a case that showed so many unusual and peculiar symptoms.

"I might believe—but no, the fever would not be present if that were true, at least so far as I am aware it would not. Miss Muriel, perhaps you had best sit with your uncle as I shall wish to be below to meet the doctor when he arrives. If you wish me in the meantime you can send the nurse below for me."

"Surely. I know you will wish to have a talk with the new doctor," answered the girl with a faint smile.

Dr. Forbes after a keen glance at his patient went down to the drawing-room where he was met by Dick Duncan the two men sitting down to a discussion of the case that was troubling both.

After half an hour an automobile came to a stop in front of the house.

"There is the Professor," announced the Doctor.

Professor Ivan Hofsky was a man of more than medium height. His shoulders had a slight stoop, the face was pale, but it was the eyes that most attracted the attention of the observer. They were full and bulbous, black as two shining coals, now and then glowing under some stress of emotion as if the fire from a grate were reflecting on the yet untouched coals.

"Professor Hofsky, I believe?" greeted the family physician.

"At your service," replied the Professor in perfect English. "You are Doctor Forbes?"

"Yes."

"I am pleased to meet you. I have heard of you."

"Not to the extent that I have heard of you, sir," replied the physician with a smile.

"Now what is the case that you wish to consult with me on?" demanded the Professor.

"Mr. Roger Bissell is the patient, Professor. You may or you may not have heard of him. He is a very wealthy man living here in his home with his nephew and niece. He was taken ill about a week ago. The symptoms are high temperature, fever, unconsciousness and you know the rest. The fever refuses to yield to any known treatment, that is to any that is known to me and that is why we have sent for you."

"No known treatment," mused the Professor, his eyes gleaming strangely for the moment.

"Yes, sir, that is the exact facts in the case."

"What treatment have you applied?"

Dr. Forbes went on to explain what his treatment of the patient had been, to all of which the scientist listened with lowered head and deep attention.

"Little more could be done, it seems to me. Of course I cannot say definitely what my opinion is until after I have seen the patient."

"No, of course not. Will you go to the patient's bedside now?"

"At your pleasure."

Dr. Forbes rose without further words, leading the way up the staircase to the room occupied by the unconscious merchant.

The nurse and Miss Muriel discreetly retired, after an introduction of the latter to the Professor who had fixed his burning eyes on the face of the girl for the briefest fraction of a moment, then bowed low.

"The patient," announced Dr. Forbes, pointing to the bed.

CHAPTER III.

WHEN THE CALL CAME.

For some moments there was silence in the room, Professor Hofsky, sitting by the bed watching the patient into whose mouth he had thrust a clinical thermometer.

The Professor laid a hand on the sick man's forehead at the same time holding the patient's other

hand. It was an unusual position for a physician to assume and attracted the attention of Dr. Forbes.

"These foreigners have ways different from ours," mused the doctor. "But they do know their business. Their training is far and away ahead of ours, but I do not know that the results are any different in the end."

"Where is the patient's family?" suddenly demanded the Professor.

"He has no family save the nephew and the niece whom you met in the room just now."

"Ah, exactly. They are his heirs?"

The Doctor bowed.

"Be good enough to send for them. I would ask them some questions regarding the beginning of this trouble, that is if you have no objections."

"Certainly not," answered Dr. Forbes cordially. "I will ask that they be sent for at once."

The physician stepped from the room and ringing for a servant ordered that Richard and Miss Duncan be asked to come to the room of the sick man. The physician stepped back.

"They will be here at once."

Upon the arrival of the two younger people Dick Duncan was introduced to the Professor, the latter coming directly to the point by beginning to ask questions.

Dick Duncan was too much overcome at times to speak in a loud tone, his voice being so lowered now and then that they were obliged to ask him to speak louder.

"How long," asked the Professor, "was your uncle in Cuba on his recent visit?"

"One month."

"Did he complain of feeling ill upon his return?"

"No, sir."

"He did not look well," interrupted Muriel.

"Ah!" exclaimed the Professor turning toward her.

"In what way?"

"His face was flushed and he appeared nervous."

"Business worries?" the Professor turned his eyes on Dr. Forbes.

"Not that I am aware of. I should say most emphatically no. Mr. Bissell had no occasion to worry. He was beyond that."

"Of course, of course. That goes without saying. When did he take to his bed?"

"Three days ago. He had been ailing for a couple of days previous to that," exclaimed the young woman.

"Of what?"

"He said he felt hot, that the climate in New York was worse than that of Cuba."

"I agree with him. And then?"

"We called Dr. Forbes. I presume he has told you all that followed. I might add that we have perfect confidence in Dr. Forbes. It was at his suggestion that you were called in consultation."

"I understand."

"Excuse me," murmured Dick Duncan rising hastily and leaving the room. They noted that his face was very pale and that his hand shook as he extended it to open the door.

"Dick takes his uncle's illness very much to heart," explained Dr. Forbes. Muriel's face quivered. She threatened to break down then and there, but by a brave effort of will managed to pull herself together.

"Has your uncle suffered from sinking spells at any time?"

"Not until this trouble came on. We thought perhaps his heart was affected until Dr. Forbes assured us that such was not the case."

"No organic trouble," the physician hastened to explain. "The heart has been acting most peculiarly for the past two days, so much so that I am at a loss to account for it considering the accompanying symptoms."

Professor Hofsky listened to the heart.

"No, not organic but there just the same. When did he lose consciousness?"

"The patient became delirious last evening," answered the physician.

"Since when he has not been rational?"

"No, I believe not."

"That is correct," agreed the young woman.

The Professor placed a delicate silver instrument against the dead man's thumb and when the instrument came away it held a tiny drop of blood. This the Professor subjected to a quick analysis on the spot, the niece and the family physician watching him anxiously as he did so.

"Do you find anything?" questioned Dr. Forbes.

"Yes."

"May I ask of what nature?"

"I will speak with you about that later after the test that I have made develops more fully."

"Very good."

"Are the patient's affairs in shape?"

"You mean—?"

The Professor nodded.

"Yes, I have no doubt. He is a very exact man. However, you do not think the case serious?"

Professor Hofsky did not answer the question. He appeared not to have heard it. His hand was on the patient's pulse again, the other laid over the heart.

"Fix me some aromatic spirits of ammonia," directed the Professor. This being prepared he administered it a few drops at a time.

The reaction had been slow. The patient's heart action he had discovered, was becoming weaker and weaker. Doctor Forbes understood the use of the ammonia, but he could not believe that the patient's heart needed stimulating at that moment.

Professor Hofsky observing the doubt in the eyes of the physician, motioned the latter to place a hand on the patient's heart, which Dr. Forbes did. The physician gave a start.

"What—what is it?" demanded Miss Muriel apprehensively.

"The heart is acting rather poorly," explained the physician.

"Surely you do not think there is any danger—my uncle is not so ill that you?"

"No, do not alarm yourself, at least not at present," soothed the doctor. "Professor, can you not reassure Miss Duncan?"

"As you say, for the present yes."

"But not for the future?"

"I will be frank with you Miss Duncan. You appear to be a young woman of unusual strength of character, therefore I shall break my ordinary rule of silence and tell you plainly what I see."

"Please do so."

"Your uncle will probably never see the light of another day."

"You—you don't mean—you—you—can't mean—"

"He will be dead before the rise of the sun on the morrow," answered the scientist gravely.

CHAPTER IV.

HIS WORD MADE GOOD.

As Professor Hofsky had said, the patient did not live to see the light of another day. Roger Bissell passed away about three o'clock on the following morning without having regained consciousness. With him were the family physician, the nurse and Miss Muriel, Richard the nephew having declared that his nerves would not stand the strain and had retired to his room to be alone with his sorrow.

Doctor Forbes was much cast down over the death of his friend of years. Muriel was heartbroken for there existed a deep affection between the beautiful young woman and her indulgent uncle.

There was mourning in the household, but the duties of the two young people must be attended to even if death had entered to disturb the happy serenity of the Bissell home.

In due time Roger Bissell was laid away. Upon the reading of the will by the family solicitor, it was found that the dead man had left his property equally between Muriel and Richard Duncan, his only heirs at law. This made each of them rich, though Muriel was the wealthier, she having inherited property from her mother. Dick had shared equally in this also, but imprudent speculation had been the means of his losing all.

"And now, my young friends," announced the lawyer after the reading of the will had been completed, "as your uncle's attorney, I have completed my work. I am no longer in the employ of my old friend Bissell. His lines have fallen into other hands. I wish you both well, and express the hope that you will use wisely and well that which I place in your hands to-day—"

Hartford Proctor, grey-haired, shrewd of eye, one of the best known men in his profession in the city of New York sat down, dabbing his eyes with his handkerchief under the pretense of mopping up the perspiration, but in reality to hide the moisture that had sprung into his eyes.

"I shall wish you to remain in charge of the affairs so far as I am concerned," said Muriel. "I beg that you will care for my property as you have done with that of my uncle."

"It will give me pleasure, my dear child, to do as you suggest. As for Dick, here, he is a man now and is well able, or at least should be," qualified the lawyer, "to attend to his affairs. In case you need advice or assistance at any time, Dick, you know who to come to."

"Yes, thank you. It is as you say, I am old enough to know how to handle my own property. A man should be his own master or he is no man at all."

"That is true."

"For that reason I shall enter into the possession of my estates at once. I was about to suggest that Muriel permit me to attend to her affairs for her, but so long as she has chosen to have you do so, I have no suggestions to make."

There was a bitter note in the young man's tone, bringing a deep flush to the face of Miss Duncan and a tightening of the lips of the lawyer.

"Why, Dick, Mr. Proctor has been in charge of my

property ever since I came into possession of it. Surely you would not have me take it from him now?"

"Certainly not. I had forgotten that fact when we began discussing the matter. Of course Mr. Proctor will be to you what he was to my uncle, his guide and councilor. I shall have to call on him for help more than once, I imagine," went on Dick earnestly, thus in a measure dispelling the unpleasant effect of his previous words.

This matter having been settled, the lawyer went over the various papers and inventories of the late merchant's property with the two heirs, explaining for their benefit the exact status of all the moneys and securities. He also placed in their hands the bonds that belonged to each. But in doing so the shrewd eyes of the old lawyer were not idle. He noted the effect on each and made mental conclusions as to what they would do with their suddenly acquired riches.

The afternoon came to a close and with it the lawyer took his departure.

"Hang on to what you have my child," he said to Muriel who had accompanied him to the door. "There are many who will now be your friends, but it will be because you have money, more than most young women of your station in life have."

"I shall remember. If you mean marriage, you need have no fear."

"Ah, that is already settled then?" questioned Mr. Proctor bending a shrewd glance into the eyes of the young woman.

Muriel blushed.

"Yes, I will tell you about it some day."

"You love him?"

"More than anything else in the world."

"Then you will wed him soon."

"Not until after a year has passed. I could not wed him earlier than that now."

"Be guided by me, child. Do not let any foolish notions deter you from doing what may be for your best interests. However, I should not express this opinion without first having had an opportunity to meet the young man."

"You shall have that opportunity."

"What is his name?"

The girl hesitated.

"Come, speak out. You need have no false modesty about confiding in me."

"I have not, believe me. The young man's name is Howard Edson."

"Howard Edson?" mused the lawyer. "Any relation to the onetime Mayor of that name?"

"Yes, his nephew."

"Ah! An excellent family, if the young man takes after them. I suppose he has money?"

"Not a cent beyond a small salary."

"Tut-tut, this won't do, this won't do. What's this you tell me, going to marry a pauper, an adventurer—"

"You must not call him that," spoke up the girl spiritedly. "Howard is not an adventurer. He is working his way up in the world. In time he will have made his mark and then you will not have the chance to say that he is an adventurer."

"Let me see, I suppose he has urged you to marry him in secret, has he not?"

"Indeed he has not. Howard would not make such a request."

"Had he spoken to your uncle?"

"No."

"Your uncle did not know him?"

"No."

"How was that?"

"Howard when he asked me to marry him discussed the matter very freely. It was to be an engagement so far as he was concerned, but I was to be free to wed another in case I met one whom I loved more than him." Muriel smiled at the thought.

"That is a queer contract. Why did he say that?"

"You see, sir, Mr. Edson would not think of marrying me until he was sufficiently independent to enable him to keep me on his own income. He would never permit me to use my own money for my support after we were married."

"Very good, very good," muttered the lawyer.

"But—by the way, how much is he making?"

"Twenty-five dollars a week."

"Humph! In my younger days that would have been considered enough to marry on and send the children to college in the bargain." Young people have high ideas these days, high ideas," he added, not appearing to have observed the vivid color that his words had called into the cheeks of Muriel Duncan.

"I'll see this young man and have a talk with him. Yes, I'll see him. I'll be better able after that to express an opinion. But Muriel, don't be a little fool. Be a big fool if you must be a fool at all, but don't be a little fool. Take an old bachelor's advice on the fool question. Good day."

With that, Hartford Proctor stamped down the steps and entered his carriage, while Muriel stood gazing after the vehicle, brooding over the old lawyer's words.

"What did he mean about not being a little fool?" wondered the girl.

CHAPTER V.

MYSTERY IN THE AIR.

Sister and brother saw little of each other during the succeeding days, each being too fully occupied with his and her own affairs to find time for each other's society. This was especially true of Dick. He was very neglectful of his beautiful sister, but that was nothing new for him. Muriel felt his neglect keenly, though she was getting somewhat used to it now.

One night Dick came in earlier than usual. He was in ill humor. Without beating about the bush he told Muriel what he thought of having an outsider manage her property when it was the place of the brother to do this for her.

Muriel protested that the lawyer having always been her guardian she saw no reason why he should not continue to be. The meeting between the two was a stormy meeting, at least so far as Dick was concerned, Muriel remaining calm, holding herself well in hand during the conversation. Her brother left the room in a hot temper and after he had gone the young woman wiped a tear from her eye and went to her own apartments. Somehow, her brother had changed since coming into his property. The old lawyer, Hartford Proctor, thought so too. He had had one or two meetings with Dick Duncan since the death of the merchant, with the result that the lawyer

had experienced a change of heart regarding the young man. Still there was nothing on which to base this dislike save for the half arrogant attitude of young Duncan.

Richard always had been an upright young man, of good habits, attentive to his uncle and the latter's affairs. He had lived with Mr. Bissell ever since graduating from college, as had Muriel, the parents of the young people having died when they were in their teens. Mr. Bissell being a bachelor and very fond of the children had taken them into his own home, assisted them to complete their education and then proposed to make them his heirs.

Two days after the discussion between brother and sister, the pair met at breakfast. Muriel's face was pale, almost haggard, still she greeted Dick with a smile.

"What's the matter with you this morning?" demanded Duncan? "You look as if you had seen a ghost," snapped the young man almost testily.

"I am afraid a ghost has been here."

"What do you mean?"

"That robbers have been in the house."

"Robbers?"

"Impossible!"

"I hope it will so prove."

"Explain what you mean?"

"The heirlooms are missing!"

"What?"

"Yes, the jewels that uncle left to me, the ones that belonged to his mother."

Dick did not look up. His face flushed with anger.

"What makes you think they have been stolen?"

"Because they are not where I left them."

"Where did you leave them?"

"In my strong box."

"Then you must have left it unlocked."

"No, I did not."

"How could anyone get into the strong box without a key if it were locked?" scoffed the young man.

"I am sure I do not know. I found the box unlocked."

"Nonsense, you left it unlocked yourself. Of course you must have, else no one could have broken into it without leaving any trace of their work. You don't seem to make much of a row about it."

"That would do no good. I am sure I feel badly enough over the loss of the jewels, not because they are worth a small fortune, but because they were once worn by auntie. Some one must have entered this house within the last few days and taken them—perhaps when we were out."

"What are you looking at me in that way for? Surely, you do not think I stole the jewels, do you?"

"Dick, Dick! How can you say such a thing? You are very unkind. Of course I know you did not take them. In the first place you would not do such a thing and in the second you are a rich man and do not have to resort to thieving for a living."

"I should say not. I didn't quite mean it that way, Sis. I'll tell you something."

"Yes."

"You are not the only one who has been robbed."

"What do you mean?"

"That I too have suffered similarly."

"You can't mean it?"

"I do mean it."

"When?"

"That I do not know."

Muriel was eyeing him with steady eyes.

"What have you lost?"

"I have lost the red ruby."

"The red ruby?" gasped Miss Duncan.

Dick nodded.

"Oh, no, Dick, please do not say that."

"What would you have me say, the ruby is gone, where, I do not know. The probabilities are that I shall never see it again."

"How did it occur?"

"You mean how did the robbery occur?"

Muriel nodded faintly.

"If I knew I should get it back. Mr. Proctor in whose possession it was, brought it to me. I was so busy that I neglected to take it to the safety deposit vault. I placed it in the secret compartment of my large desk, the same compartment where uncle used to keep his valuable papers temporarily."

"You had not seen it since you placed it there?"

"No, I hadn't."

"When did you miss it?"

"Last night when I was going over some papers that had been put in the same place."

"Oh, Dick, we both have suffered. If it had been money I shouldn't have felt so badly about it. For a similar reason, I regret your losing the red ruby because uncle brought it from India when he was a young man and it has been in his possession ever since."

"Well, crying over it will not bring it back. It will require some more strenuous methods than shedding tears."

"Yes, I agree with you there. I have an idea."

"What is your idea?"

"We must have the police find the jewels."

Young Duncan laughed.

"The police, why Muriel they wouldn't find it if it were thrust under their noses."

"Then what would you suggest?"

"We must have a detective. There are plenty of clever fellows who are on the square. There is some fellow that Proctor was talking about one day when I was in his office. I heard him recommend a client to engage the man, but I do not recall the name."

"Then why not go and see Mr. Proctor this morning and get the name of this man? The longer we delay the less chance there is that we shall ever get the jewels back."

"Yes, that's a good idea. I'll do that. I shouldn't say anything about the loss of the jewels were I in your place. It will only cause talk and the less of that the better for all concerned."

"I shall say nothing about it, you may be sure. You will see Mr. Proctor this morning, will you not?"

"Providing I do not make different arrangements in the meantime. I am going down town now. I probably shall not be home to lunch, but I'll likely be in to dinner."

When Dick Duncan returned that night Muriel was awaiting him with anxious face. He led the way into the library before speaking of the subject which was uppermost in her mind.

CHAPTER VI.

VISITED BY A DETECTIVE.

"Did you see Mr. Proctor?" questioned Muriel the moment the door closed behind them.

"No, but I saw my friend Will Cavendish who has had considerable experience in these matters. He is

connected with Tiffany's, you know. He said he knew a man who was all to the good, discreet and clever."

"You didn't get the name of the detective?"

"Oh no, in fact I didn't ask."

"When are you going to see him?"

"I am not going to see him. I told Will to send the fellow around. I don't like to do business with those vulgar chaps, but in this case there is no other way. Were we to call in the police the newspapers would have the whole story next morning. By engaging a private detective we shall be able to control him and thus keep our affairs to ourselves."

"Yes, I shrink from contact with the police fully as much as do you, but regarding the private men, I know nothing about them. When is this man coming to see us?"

"I supposed he would be here before this so long as there was such a nice fat job awaiting him. He will be here before the evening is ended, you may be sure of that."

Richard Duncan was not much of a prophet. They waited up late that night, he remaining at home nearly all of the following day, but no detective appeared. Dick called up his friend to learn if the latter had notified the detective. The friend said he had done so, but that the man probably was otherwise engaged. He assured Duncan that he would receive a call from the detective, else he would have heard from the man before this.

Cavendish added that he had no personal acquaintance with the officer, but that he had heard the firm speak very highly of him and that he had worked up cases for them with very great success. With this, Dick let the matter rest. He decided to remain at home, hoping that the detective fellow, as he called him would put in an appearance.

Nine o'clock arrived, but no detective. At a quarter past nine the butler entered the library where brother and sister were sitting with the announcement that a gentleman was in the reception hall, desiring to see Mr. Duncan.

"Who is it?"

"I do not know."

"Did he not send in a card?"

"No, sir."

"I'll go out and see who he is. There is a possibility that it is the man himself. Of course we couldn't expect those fellows to present their cards. They are not gentlemen, you know."

"Their profession does not prevent their being gentlemen, Dick. You should disabuse your mind of the fact that money makes a gentleman of a man. Sometimes it has quite the opposite effect."

"Don't preach," commanded the young man flushing at the shot his sister had given him.

"I am not preaching, I am stating a fact."

"I'll do the talking if this is the man. I do not wish you to mix up with that kind. You see I am more considerate of you than you are of me. But you are my sister and I know what is due to a member of my family."

Muriel made no reply, but a smile lurked about the corners of her mouth. She had had evidence of the respect of her brother for her. She was a young woman with a mind of her own and she was able and courageous enough to use that mind when the occasion demanded.

Dick had been gone but a few moments when he returned with an elderly gentleman.

"Mr. Leonard, this is my sister. Mr. Leonard is the detective whom we sent for, Muriel."

The detective bowed gracefully and with a respect and deference that caused Miss Duncan to look at him more closely.

She saw before her a man past middle age, faultlessly, but not foppishly dressed. From his irreproachable white vest to the tips of his well fitting shoes, there was not an item in his make-up that she could have criticized if worn by the best dressed man in their own fashionable set. The face before her too, appealed strongly. It was a face of character, a face kindly, yet stern, she knew, despite the winning smile that had greeted her when her brother made the introduction.

"It is possible that this is one of those 'vulgar detectives' that my brother is so fearful of having me mixed up with? If so, I would that some of my acquaintances had become detectives instead of society flowers. This man is a gentleman. There can be no possibility of a doubt about that."

Dick motioned Mr. Leonard to a seat with a patronizing air which drew an amused smile from the detective, bringing a flush to the face of the young woman.

"Dick can be such an idiot," thought the girl disgustedly.

"Mr. Cavendish told you that I wished to see you, of course?"

"I have not the pleasure of Mr. Cavendish's acquaintance. The request came through the firm. I do not know who made it specifically."

"You were to have called last evening. We waited up for you until a late hour."

"Indeed. What led you to think that I should be here last evening?"

"Because I requested it."

Detective Leonard laughed.

"Possibly there were other demands on my time, Mr. Duncan. We detectives," accenting the word "detectives", "are occasionally busy as well as you men of affairs."

Duncan swelled a bit at this.

"Yes, being such a busy man I could ill afford to waste the time in waiting for your arrival."

"Then why should you not have sent for some one else if you were in such haste. But to the point. You are busy. I will not take up your valuable time. You wished to see me?"

"Yes, on a very important matter. We have been robbed?"

"Indeed?"

"Yes."

"Of what?"

"Something like a hundred thousand dollars worth."

"Jewels, of course?"

"Yes, how did you know?"

"You told me yourself."

Duncan shot a curious glance at the detective, but evidently concluding to let the matter pass, continued with his narration.

"Yes, we have lost some very valuable family jewels. My sister and myself have suffered an equally serious loss, though perhaps hers was the greater in point of money value."

"What did you lose?"

"A very remarkable stone which we call the Red Ruby."

"Ah! Let me see, that was the stone that Mr. Bissell brought from India, was it not?" questioned the detective calmly.

CHAPTER VII.

SPRINGING A SURPRISE.

Had the detective fired off a gun it could not have created greater amazement than did his calm announcement as quoted at the close of the foregoing chapter.

Dick Duncan's face flushed, as did that of his sister. Hers merged into a half smile, but the face of her brother took on a perplexed look.

"What do you know about the Red Ruby?" demanded the young man sharply.

"Nothing."

"But you have just stated that my uncle brought it from India?"

"That is the fact, is it not?"

"Yes, but how should you know anything about it?"

"I never reveal professional secrets," replied Mr. Leonard simply.

"But your knowledge of the stone is knowledge that belongs to me—"

"I beg your pardon, did you say belongs to you?"

"Yes, certainly, it belongs to me."

"I am sorry to have to differ with you. However, the answer to your question would be of no use to you. Were the contrary the case I should use my knowledge in your interest."

"Mr. Leonard is right," spoke up Miss Muriel. "We have no right to press him for an explanation to—"

The detective smiled his acknowledgement of her courteous interference in his behalf.

"A very fine young woman," was his mental conclusion.

"Very good, I will let the matter pass for the moment, but still I am of the opinion that we shall have to come to an explanation before I can let you have the case."

The detective rose with a bow to Miss Duncan.

Dick gazed at him inquiringly.

"What do you mean?"

"That I am taking my leave."

"But, sir, I have not told you all the facts yet."

"I am well aware of that. You did state that we should have to come to an understanding before you could give me the case. I am not anxious for the case, sir, nor shall I give you any explanation regarding my own affairs. Such explanations as are made shall have to come from you and your sister," with another bow and a reassuring smile at Miss Muriel.

"Pray be seated, Mr. Leonard, I am sure you would not leave us in this manner. We need you and we shall appreciate your services more than I can tell you. Won't you sit down?"

"I could not well do otherwise under the circumstances," answered the detective with a rare smile that brought a twinkle into the eyes of Miss Duncan. It was plain that this man was no vulgar person inexperienced in the ways of the polite world. It was Richard who was the vulgar one in this instance.

"State your case as briefly as possible, that is if you desire me to hear it. If not, do not let us waste

your valuable time," said the detective in a business-like tone.

"As I have already told you we have been robbed."

"Under what circumstances?"

"We do not know. My sister's valuables were in a strong box, mine were in a secret compartment."

"Where?"

"In the library."

"Ah! The secret compartment in the desk there."

"Sir, this is going too far. It strikes me that you are altogether too familiar with our affairs, and now you have the assurance to tell me of the exact spot where I had secreted the Ruby for safe keeping. I demand that you tell me how you knew this. It is most extraordinary."

"My dear sir, the information came from yourself."

"It is false!"

"Sir?"

There was a puzzled look on Muriel's face. She could not fathom the mystery. She knew the explanation was at hand for the caller was smiling quizzically.

"I did nothing of the sort."

"I am going to show you how easy it is to be mistaken Mr. Duncan. It is true we shall lose a few moments of time, but perhaps the loss will not disturb us very much."

"Explain!"

"I am going to."

"Proceed."

"When you spoke of the hiding place of the Red Ruby perhaps you are unaware that you instinctively glanced at the very spot?"

Muriel was smiling now. Her quick mind had discovered the detective's keen trick.

"Glanced at it?" repeated Richard his face still wearing the puzzled expression.

"Yes, you are looking at it now. Wait!"

The detective stepped over to the desk, quickly lifted a false top then with a pencil he tapped against the inner back of the desk. The tapping gave off a hollow sound.

"There is the compartment where you hid the Red Ruby."

"Ah, indeed! Perhaps you will be good enough to show me how the secret compartment is opened?" sneered young Duncan.

"That is none of my affairs at the present moment. I have no doubt that I should be able to open the compartment within a very short time were I so disposed. Those secret compartments in desks are only fancied security. Every well regulated crook is as familiar with them as are you with your own, perhaps more so."

Dick was regarding Mr. Leonard with a queer look on his face. Muriel was smiling.

"Are you satisfied now, Richard? This should show you that Mr. Leonard understands his business rather better than you appear to think."

"I give up. I'm dead beat. If I had a scent like yours I'd make more money out of it than do you in your business."

The detective laughed softly.

"Perhaps I do not work for such small sums after all," laughed the caller.

"I do not seem to have heard of you before. What is your full name?" asked the young millionaire.

"You got my name wrong. It is not Leonard. My name is Henry Loveland."

"Loveland, Loveland?"
 "Yes."
 "Somehow it seems familiar to me."
 "Perhaps. It is not an uncommon name. Possibly my nom de plume or whatever you may choose to call it may be more familiar to you."
 "And that is?"
 "Old Sleuth."

CHAPTER VIII.

OLD SLEUTH UNVEILED.

The detective's announcement again had the effect of an exploding bomb upon the man and the woman before him, especially the man. Dick Duncan flushed to the roots of his hair.

"Oh, I have heard my father speak of you, sir," cried Muriel.

"This appears to me like an attempt at deception," exclaimed the young man. "Pray, sir, why did you not reveal your true self at once?"

"My dear sir," answered Old Sleuth with dignity, "I did not come here to be interrogated, I came here to ask questions myself. Do you wish me to go on or take my departure?"

"Pray remain," begged Miss Duncan. "I fear we have not been very hospitable nor very polite."

"Is it your wish that I hear the story, Mr. Duncan?" turning to Dick.

The latter bowed, but there was a frown upon his forehead. The young man was not wholly satisfied at the turn affairs had taken. Old Sleuth had proved too keen for him, Duncan having rather having appeared to poor advantage when he had hoped to make a profound impression upon his caller, by which it will be seen that Dick Duncan was a vain young gentleman who set a high value on his own position and attainments.

"Very good, now please tell me all you know about the robbery. We will begin with Miss Duncan. Where were your jewels kept?"

Muriel explained as she already had done to her brother.

"When did you last see them?"

"Nearly a week ago."

"Under what circumstances?"

"I had gone to the strong box for a ring that I desired to wear."

"The jewels were all there at that time?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you locked the safe?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"That is where sister is mistaken, she thought she locked the safe, but in reality left it unlocked."

"Ah, let us see. You took the keys away with you, did you not?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now I have not seen your strong box, but in the case of most of them, one cannot withdraw the key without having first turned it in the lock, thus locking the box. Is this the case with your box?"

"Oh, yes, sir, Mr. Loveland. That is it. You see, Richard, Mr. Loveland is better informed as to this matter than am I. He has shown you too that you were mistaken. I did not leave the safe unlocked. It would have been impossible for me to have done so—"

"When did you next open the safe?" interrupted the detective, smiling within himself at his success in prov-

ing that Duncan did not know what he was talking about in reality.

"This morning when I went to return the ring, taking another."

"I should like to know if you found the safe locked?"

"Yes, sir, just as I left it."

"Did you not consider that peculiar?"

"Of course, sir."

"I suppose the members of your household are above reproach?"

"I so consider them."

"It is my opinion that some of my uncle's rascally servants are responsible for the theft. Were I to follow my own impressions I should have them all arrested."

"Oh, no, you would not," smiled the detective.

"Why should I not?"

"In the first place you have no evidence against them. In the second you would have some fine damages to pay as a result of your hasty action. No, it was not a servant robbery, that is not wholly."

"Not wholly?"

"No."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Perhaps much, perhaps little. Who besides the members of your household knew of the presence of the jewels in the house?"

"No one, so far as I know. They would have no means of knowing."

"This would seem to bear out my suspicion," nodded Duncan.

"Not necessarily. Other features might have entered into the mystery."

"What for instance?"

"A burglar might have entered the house on the long chance of finding plunder."

"I have no idea that you will ever get the missing property, sir," spoke up Duncan. "It seems almost like a waste of time to look for it."

"You may do as you think best, Richard. I engage Mr. Loveland to take my case and try to recover my jewels."

"I accept the mission, my dear Miss Duncan," answered the detective with a bow. "Will it be convenient for me to take a look at the safe and the room?"

"Certainly, sir, if you will accompany me above I will show you over the whole house there. Dick, will you come?"

"Yes," assented her brother, the detective thought rather reluctantly.

Miss Duncan led the way to her private apartments. In a small adjoining dressing room stood the ordinary strong box, which was in reality no strong box at all. Any cheap cracksman could go through one of those boxes in record time, as the detective well knew.

Sleuth took one glance at the face of the safe, but he appeared to be more interested in the plan of the house on the second floor where they were at the moment.

"Whose apartments are these to the left of yours?" he asked.

"My brother's private study. No one sleeps in them."

"And the other side?"

"My personal maid."

"Ah! She has access to your rooms at all times?"

"When I am here only. My rooms are always

locked, even when I go below stairs. It is foolish, but uncle got me in the habit of locking my apartments some years ago and I have been doing it ever since."

"And to no purpose," smiled the detective.

"To no purpose, so it would appear," answered Miss Muriel, smiling in return.

Sleuth stepped over, making a quick careful examination of the window under the pretense of looking out into the yard. If he made any discovery the others were not aware of the fact, for the expression of his face did not change at all. In crossing the room he passed close to the safe shooting a quick, inquiring glance at that. This time Old Sleuth did see something.

"Where do you keep your keys, Miss Duncan?"

"About my waist when I am at home."

"When you have retired?"

"In my dressing room on that side," indicating the side next to the maid's apartments.

"And when you are out?"

"Locked in my secretary there."

"Have you been out of the house during any evening in the past week?"

"No, sir, you know I am not going to theatres now."

"I understand. You spend much of your evenings down stairs, do you not?"

"Yes, sir."

"In what room?"

"In the library when my brother is out."

"All this talk is childish," exclaimed Richard Duncan impatiently.

"Perhaps to you," answered the detective dryly.

"It has its purpose, just the same, my dear sir."

"What is the purpose?"

"To fix the crime."

"And do you think you shall be able to do that?" scoffed the young man.

"Do I think?"

"Yes."

"No, I do not think for I already have fixed the crime to my own satisfaction!" was the startling reply.

CHAPTER IX.

LAYING THE POWDER TRAIN.

Once more Old Sleuth had startled his hearers. Both Miss Duncan and her brother changed color under the startling announcement, and for the moment they were too amazed to speak. Richard was the first to find his voice.

"You say you have fixed the crime?" he asked steadily.

"To my own satisfaction, I said."

"Then perhaps you will be good enough to enlighten us," said the young man, sarcastically.

"No, I do not think I shall at the present moment. Proofs are required to bolster up a charge of this sort, you know, else the consequences may be the same as would have followed your arresting the servants. One must necessarily go slow in an affair as serious as the present one. If there is nothing more that you wish to make inquiry about, I think I had best take my departure."

"When shall we see you again?" questioned Muriel.

"Soon, I trust. I cannot state positively now."

Duncan drew his check book toward him.

"How much do I owe you? I desire to pay as we go and—"

"You owe me nothing," replied the detective, his thin lips closing so firmly as to almost hide the mouth line. "Time enough to discuss the matter of terms when I have accomplished something. I bid you good evening."

Miss Duncan rose, but her brother remained seated at his desk, he having lighted a cigar in the meantime.

"Better take a cigar before you go, Loveland," he said ironically.

"Thank you no," the detective made polite reply, after which bowing over the hand of the young woman he followed the servant who had been summoned to conduct him to the door.

"That man is a rank fraud," exclaimed Richard the moment the detective had gotten well out of the house. "You know better than that, Dick," objected his sister.

"I say he is! The idea of his saying that he had fixed the crime already. It's preposterous. He is a big bluff."

"On the contrary he is altogether too smart for you Richard Duncan. He could wind you about his finger without your being aware of the operation. Besides this, the man is a gentleman. I have never met a man of more perfect manners nor a better bred one. I wish there were more like him in our set even if he is a detective, as you would say."

"Rubbish!" scoffed Dick. "I could prove to you that he is a fraud and—"

"Please do not waste the time in trying. It would be of no use. I am perfectly able to form my own opinions and abide by them. I think you will find that Mr. Loveland will do all that he has promised to do, and perhaps considerably more. Good night, Dick."

Miss Duncan rose, leaving the library for her own apartments. In the meantime, Old Sleuth had stepped into the street, passed along a short distance, then making a quick change in his appearance started back toward the Duncan mansion. The house stood in the middle of large, well kept grounds, one of the few places of this sort in the Metropolis. This gave the detective an opportunity to move about for the purpose of making his further investigations with slight fear of being discovered.

Sleuth walked along until he found himself beneath the window of the dressing room adjoining Miss Muriel's private boudoir.

A Moorish balcony, one of those little ornamental affairs that are of no practical use, extended along the front of the dressing room, but did not reach to the windows of the other of her rooms. An athletic person might have managed to get from one of the adjoining windows to the balcony, but Sleuth did not give this more than momentary consideration.

"Hello, what have we here?" questioned the detective.

What had attracted his attention was a strong vine that twined its way upward, finally winding its tentacles about the Moorish balcony some twenty feet above his head.

"I think our friends made their entrance by way of this Jack-the-Bean-Stalk ladder. No, there can be no doubt of it."

Sleuth was down on his hands and knees examining the turf at the base of the vine, by the aid of his flash

light. Running a thin bar of light up the vine he found that it was torn and shattered in spots as if some one had been floundering about in an effort to climb it.

"Some one has climbed it," he muttered. "The footprints are almost obliterated, but there is something about them that tells me more than would the footprints do. This case is going to lead into unexpected channels unless I am greatly mistaken. I—"

Sleuth stopped suddenly.

A man was approaching him.

"I reckon I've got you this time, my hearty!"

"A copper," muttered the detective.

"Stand up and put up your hands!" commanded the policeman.

Sleuth stepped forward with hands half way up to his shoulders.

All at once he leaped forward. His right fist shot out.

Biff!

The policeman measured his length upon the ground. Old Sleuth's aim had been sure and his drive as quick as a bolt of lightning from the skies.

"I am sorry I had to do that, but it had to be done," he muttered. "But, I must be getting out of here. He will be waking up in a minute and I don't care to wait here to make explanations."

The detective slipped away, soon disappearing in the shadows among the trees, while the policeman upon recovering, rang the door of the house reporting to young Duncan what he had seen in the grounds.

The young man was more or less disturbed at this. He could not understand the visit of the intruder at all. He had reasons for wondering at this late visitation.

In the meantime Old Sleuth repaired to his home where he spent hours brooding over the mystery in hand, which was much more of a mystery than he had at first supposed. He laid out his plans for the following day with great care. The case was a delicate one to handle, as he well knew and a slip might be attended with serious consequences.

Early on the following morning he started down town, entering the building where Hartford Proctor had his offices. As Sleuth was ascending the stairs he saw just ahead of him the familiar figure of Dr. Forbes. The detective was not acquainted with the Doctor, but knew him well by sight as he did many other persons in the great city.

Sleuth knew that Dr. Forbes had been in attendance upon Mr. Bissell during the last hours of the latter's illness. For this reason the detective felt more than ordinary interest in the visit of the doctor to the office of the family lawyer and adviser.

"Now I wonder what he can be here for?" muttered the officer. "He is undoubtedly going to visit Mr. Proctor. I think I'll let them have their interview. It will be the better for my purpose that they do so."

As Sleuth had deduced, Dr. Forbes entered the lawyer's office. Sleuth decided not to wait. He made arrangements so that he should be informed when the doctor departed from the lawyer's office, then hurried from the building.

Two hours later the detective returned, just in time to see the doctor leaving the building. Sleuth went on up to Mr. Proctor's office where he was destined to give the latter a great surprise.

CHAPTER X.

THE LAWYER IS DISTURBED.

What had occurred between Mr. Proctor and Dr. Forbes, Old Sleuth of course did not know. He was satisfied that he should be able to draw the facts from the lawyer in case the information seemed desirable to obtain.

Henry Loveland sent in his card, bearing the latter name and after a time was admitted to the private office. The lawyer did not recognize the great detective under the plain title of Henry Loveland, and looked at the detective inquiringly as he motioned the latter to a chair.

"You wished to see me professionally?" questioned Mr. Proctor.

"Yes and no. You were the confidential attorney for the late Mr. Roger Bissell, were you not?"

"I was," answered the lawyer shortly with a slight tightening of the lips that was not lost on his caller. "Why do you ask?"

"I will explain my reasons for so doing in good time. The property was left to the nephew and the niece, I believe?"

"You must excuse me, sir, but I never discuss the business of my clients."

"It is immaterial. I am in possession of most of the facts."

"Who are you?"

"I am a detective."

"Ah! A detective?"

"Yes, sir."

"In whose interest are you here?"

"Partly in my own, partly in the interest of two persons directly interested in the subject under discussion. You are perhaps aware that Mr. Duncan and Miss Duncan have been robbed?"

"Robbed!" exclaimed the lawyer the color suddenly rushing to his face.

"Yes, sir."

"Robbed of what?"

"The family jewels for one thing."

"Is it possible? You mean the jewels left to Miss Duncan by her uncle?"

Sleuth nodded.

"But when—how?"

"They were removed from the strong box in her dressing room. How or when is a matter for investigation."

"You amaze me! Then you are representing the young woman?"

"I have been employed by both to recover the missing gems."

Mr. Proctor reflected.

"You spoke of both having suffered from the robbery, you mean, I take it, that both have suffered from the loss of these stones."

"Yes and no. You no doubt know of the existence of a very beautiful stone that Mr. Bissell brought from India many years ago, known as the Red Ruby?"

"Yes, yes, what of it?"

"That too has been taken."

"Good Heaven man, is this true?"

Sleuth nodded.

"Yes."

"And I have not been informed?"

"Miss Duncan thought her brother was going to consult you about the case. Instead some friend of his suggested that he send for me, that is how I chance

to be interested in the affair. You are still the attorney for the young people, the nephew and the niece, are you not?"

"For Miss Duncan," answered Mr. Proctor. "Not for Mr. Duncan."

"Ah, may I ask why not in the latter case?"

"No, you may not," was the somewhat testy reply.

"That is a matter that is none of your concern."

Sleuth bowed gracefully to the lawyer's decision.

"What do you wish with me—what do you expect to learn from me?"

"Oh, perhaps many things—from you and Dr. Forbes."

Mr. Proctor started.

"What do you mean?"

"Has it not struck you that Mr. Bissell's death possessed some peculiar features?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean—peculiar features."

The lawyer's face was pale and beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead.

"Man, you are drawing a terrible inference."

"No, you had already drawn it before I came in. You and the Doctor had been discussing this very phase of the affair. What did the Doctor say?"

"Our—our conversation was of a private and confidential nature."

"And you refuse to tell me what passed between you two?"

"Most certainly I refuse."

"Then I shall have to tell you."

"You tell me?"

"Yes."

"Very well, I will listen," replied Mr. Proctor with a peculiar smile.

"The doctor called to discuss Mr. Bissell's death with you, which he has never fully understood. He has even been to see the great Professor who was called in on consultation. Still Dr. Forbes is not satisfied. He visits you today because certain other things have come under his notice—six other prominent, wealthy men have died within the past three weeks under almost identical circumstances. Three of these latter were his own cases. Naturally he was disturbed. He suspects and yet he does not know what to suspect. So do you, but the difference is you do suspect and you have formed a certain and definite theory in your own mind. It is so terrible a conclusion that you would not even confide it to your Maker in your nightly prayers, providing you indulge in nightly prayers. It is a suspicion—a conclusion that is too horrible to be even thought of. You did not agree with the Doctor, you listened and the more you listened the more fixed became your own conclusions in the matter. You were horror stricken, even the horror of it all had not left your face when I came into your private office just now."

"Good God, man—"

"Certain facts already in your possession bear out the truth of your theory. Mr. Proctor will you keep these facts to yourself and thus be an accessory after the fact or will you make a clean breast of what you know, of what you suspect and thus aid in the cause of justice."

"Good God, man, who are you?" gasped the lawyer, his face ashen in its palor.

"I am Henry Leonard, Detective, otherwise known as OLD SLEUTH," was the quiet answer.

CHAPTER XI.

PROBING THE MYSTERY.

"Old Sleuth," muttered the lawyer, fixing his keen old eyes—troubled eyes in this instance—on the face of his caller. "The great detective of that name?"

"I am a detective."

"Why—why do you come to me?"

"Because you can help me."

"Mr. Loveland even were what you say the truth and were it known to me as such, I could not help you."

"Why not, sir?"

"I am placed in a peculiar position. You should understand it without the necessity of my going into trying details."

"I understand that you are professionally involved and that you feel you cannot discuss the matter freely with me without violating what you call professional ethics."

"That is it exactly."

"Then I shall have to go about obtaining my information in another way. Do you know anything about the young man to whom Miss Duncan is engaged?"

Mr. Proctor regarded the detective wonderingly.

"Is there anything that you do not know about?"

"Many things, sir, else I should not be here."

"I know of him. I have never met the gentleman."

"He is said to be a fine young man, is he not?"

"According to Miss Duncan, there is none better," answered the lawyer with a wan smile.

Sleuth laughed.

"Naturally. Has the brother ever been mixed up in any affairs to your knowledge?"

"I thought it was understood that I was not to answer any professional questions?"

"The questions that I am asking are not of a nature that you cannot very properly answer. They are questions entirely outside the fact, but having a bearing upon it. Has he ever had an affair?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Then who is the woman with whom he is keeping company at the present time?"

"Is there one?" questioned the lawyer bending keen eyes on the face of his caller.

"Yes."

"How long has this been going on?"

"I have traced it back for some weeks. Beyond that I do not know. I do not think it goes further than six weeks."

"Who is she?"

"The woman is known as the Countess Ritzkie. She is a woman who is accepted by society and a very brilliant person, I am told."

"Ah!" reflected the lawyer. "You know her?"

"No."

"Do you know anything about her?"

"Very little."

"In what way is he connected with her other than in a social manner?"

"They have dined together in semi-public places quite frequently of late."

"How do you know that?"

"By the same means that I know many other things," smiled the detective. "We have methods of learning much that at the same time seems waste knowledge, but which after a time is sure to be found to bear on one subject or another in which we are interested."

"Is she in company with any one?"

"None that I know of, save her servants, her maid and one other."

Mr. Proctor reflected with chin in hand for some time.

"You have been very frank with me, Mr. Loveland, besides, your reputation is one that there is no gainsaying. Will you tell me just what you suspect in this affair?"

"I suspect Miss Duncan has been robbed," answered the detective meaningly.

"And Mr. Duncan as well?"

"Perhaps."

"Whom do you suspect of having committed these crimes?"

"What I may suspect is not proof. I had hoped to get some facts regarding the family from you."

"What facts do you want?"

"First of all regarding the death of the merchant."

"I can give you nothing."

"Why not, pray?"

"I know nothing, that is the principal reason. Secondly, I should not feel at liberty to talk if I did."

"The young nephew is an upright young man, I understand?"

"He has always borne an excellent reputation. I will say, however, that I do not like him. He is too forward, too cock sure of himself. That, perhaps is due to the fact that he is still young—from lack of experience with the world."

"Perhaps he has had more experience than you know," said the detective suggestively.

"You suspect something in connection with this woman?" questioned the lawyer shrewdly.

"I suspect that society is being taken in so far as she is concerned."

"In what way?"

"I believe her to be an adventuress. There is something back of all this that I have not fathomed yet, but I shall before I have finished with this remarkable case. How about the other patients of the Doctor—what was the matter with them?"

"You yourself have answered that question. They appeared to have died from the same disease that took off Mr. Bissell."

"Does the Doctor name it?"

"No, he doesn't know what to call it."

"Was counsel called in?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"The great Russian specialist."

"Ah! Professor Ivan Hofsky?"

"The same."

"He is an eminent authority?"

"So I believe. In this or rather in these cases as in that of Mr. Bissell, he forecasted the patient's death almost to an hour."

"H-m-m-m," mused Sleuth, and for several moments he sat thinking deeply.

"What are you contemplating?"

"I must see the Russian specialist," said Loveland.

"You will see him?"

"Certainly."

"You will have difficulty."

"How so?"

"I tried to see him after he had attended Mr. Bissell and was informed that he did not receive callers save on important professional business."

Sleuth laughed.

"We shall see whether I succeed any better. I have an idea that I shall. And now, Mr. Proctor, if you have nothing further to say to me, I think I shall be going. Think over all that I have said. I am sure you will see that it is to your advantage and that of your client to make a full confidante of me. I shall obtain all the facts but it may take me somewhat longer than were I to get them from you first hand."

"I'll think the matter over," announced the lawyer.

"I—"

At that moment there came an interruption that startled the lawyer out of his usual composure, an interruption that Old Sleuth would have preferred not have occurred.

CHAPTER XII.

THE DETECTIVE DISMISSED.

"Good morning, Mr. Duncan," greeted Old Sleuth, rising and bowing easily.

Richard Duncan had stepped into the office unannounced. There was a light of anger in his eyes and his fingers worked convulsively as he sought with a great effort of will to control himself.

"Ah, Richard, good morning," said the lawyer, himself regaining his self possession which the sudden entry of the young man had disturbed. "If you will step out into the other office I will see you very shortly. As you will observe, I am engaged at the moment. Did not the boy tell you so?"

"He did and I waited for some time, then I chose to enter."

Both the lawyer and the detective wondered how much of their conversation if any, young Duncan had overheard. Sleuth did not care particularly, but the old lawyer did. He did not like the idea of being unmasked, especially by his young client.

"Proctor, can you let me have some money?"

"Certainly, how much do you want?"

"That depends. I haven't much of any in my pocket today. I want to pay this fellow and have done with him."

"Are you referring to me, sir?" demanded Sleuth easily.

"Yes, you."

"And, pray what have I done to merit your displeasure?"

"I am not bound to make any explanations to you."

"Oh, yes you are, sir."

"I am?" The young man's jaw assumed a belligerent set.

"Certainly you are."

"And if I do not?"

"Then I am no longer in your employ."

Duncan laughed harshly.

"A terrible threat, indeed."

"I might easily make one that would disturb you more."

For an instant the eyes of the two men met and a faint wave of color surged into the cheeks of the young millionaire.

"You are discharged."

"Accepted."

"How much do I owe you?"

"Nothing."

"But I prefer to pay you and have done with you."

"I prefer to have you have done with you also, but not to accept your money."

"Give me fifty dollars, Proctor."

The lawyer handed over the money which Duncan tossed on the table before the detective. The latter brushed it aside with an impatient gesture.

"I accept your dismissal, Richard Duncan. Had you not dismissed me I should have soon found a way to dismiss myself. That will leave me much freer to proceed with my investigations."

"What investigations?" interrupted Richard.

"If you will permit me to do so, I will answer your question by saying that it is none of your business."

Duncan uttered a growl. In the meantime the lawyer had been watching with interest, the rapid fire play of words between the two men. He understood the detective's motive much better than did the young man who was so unwittingly hurling himself upon the rocks.

"We'll see whether it is any of my affair or not."

"I shall play perfectly fair with you, Duncan," went on the officer. "You do not deserve it after the way you have treated me, but you shall have it fair and straight in the face. You are a loafer. Money has spoiled you even if you were not spoiled long before that. I am not sure that you were not —"

"I'll throttle you if you don't get out of here!" hissed young Duncan.

"Richard, remember that you are in my office. I'll have no disgraceful scenes here," warned the lawyer.

"If you insist on having it still straighter come outside," nodded the detective pleasantly. "I am an old man but I think I can give you a lesson that will last you for some time. Shall we adjourn to the corridor and settle our disagreements?"

"No, I wouldn't soil my hands on you."

"As you choose. I dislike to do that with you, but fear I shall have to before I have done with you. As I was about to say when you so rudely interrupted me, I am no longer in your service, but I am still in the employ of your sister."

"You are not!" cried the young man almost beside himself with anger. "I dismiss you from her service also."

"I decline that dismissal."

"I'll find a way to make her dismiss you!"

"Richard!" warned Mr. Proctor, "you are forgetting yourself. You are going too far and you will live to regret the words you have spoken here this morning. Muriel is of age. She is perfectly able to decide for herself what she wants and if she is not I shall do what I can to assist her. This gentleman I know by reputation. I know him to be an upright as well as clever man. I should recommend you to withdraw the words you have spoken."

"I'll withdraw nothing!" interrupted Duncan sharply.

"As you chose, but Richard, do not let me hear of your trying to force Muriel into anything. Remember that she has a protector in me even if her own flesh and blood turns against her. What has occurred to so change you, to make a veritable madman of you this morning?"

"You want to know. Then listen for my words are for you as well as for this miserable spy."

"Go on," nodded Sleuth, as Duncan paused for breath. "You are doing splendidly. Such emotion on the stage would make a second Booth of you. Why, any manager on Broadway would pay you a price for such heroics as —"

"I have a right to be enraged," went on Richard. "I come here to see you about a matter and I find the man I had entrusted with a mission, closeted with you trying to pump information out of you about me. He's a low down blackmailer —"

"Richard, Richard, be careful!"

"I'll not be careful. I'll say my say. He is a miserable blackmailer. I have caught him red handed, caught him prying into affairs that are none of his business. Curse you, I'll teach you —"

Beside himself with rage young Duncan leaped from his chair and threw himself upon the detective. That is he threw himself upon the spot where Old Sleuth had been sitting. But Old Sleuth was not there. The detective had moved and was standing some six feet from the spot when Richard fell upon the spot.

The officer was smiling, but his eyes were not. They were steady and steely.

Duncan made a second rush at him.

Then a startling change came over the affair in the office of the staid old lawyer.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN THE HANDS OF A MASTER.

With as much ease as if Duncan had been a mere child, Old Sleuth gathered the young man up in a pair of powerful arms and despite the struggles of young Duncan, carried him from the office.

"Open the door!" commanded Sleuth to the startled office boy. The latter did so.

Sleuth threw the young man out into the corridor.

"There, the next time you want to pick a row take a man of your size and I should suggest that it be a young man too."

The detective turned, entering the office.

"I'll kill you for that!" screamed Duncan.

Sleuth had closed the door by this time, a grin appearing on his face as he stepped into the private office again, seating himself as calmly as if nothing had occurred out of the ordinary.

"To resume where we left off, I will leave you to think the matter over Mr. Proctor. Perhaps you may decide to speak more freely than at present. You have seen what temper I have to contend with."

"My advice to you, sir, would be to look out for that young man. His father possessed just such an ungovernable temper and came near murdering a man once. You have not seen the last of him."

"I have an idea that he has not seen the last of me," was the smiling answer.

The eyes of the two men met in a significant glance.

Sleuth bade the lawyer good bye and left the office without another word. A glance about the corridor told the detective that his assailant had left the place, for which Sleuth was thankful, as he did not care to get into further trouble with the young man.

"I shall meet him again," muttered the detective, "then we will settle our difficulties, though I do not imagine that he will be very well pleased with the settlement."

From the office of the lawyer the detective went to his home. To his surprise, he was met with the information that a gentleman who's card bore the name of Professor Ivan Hofsky, was in the library awaiting him.

Sleuth smiled a soft satisfied smile.

"How long has he been waiting?"

"The better part of an hour," the servant informed him.

The detective stepped into the library, greeting his caller cordially.

"To what am I indebted for this unexpected visit, sir?" questioned the officer.

"You are Detective Henry Loveland?"

"The same, sir, at your service."

Each man was taking a quick mental measurement of the other, but from wholly different motives. What the result of those inventories was we will leave the reader to infer by what followed afterwards.

"Be seated," said the detective.

"I have called upon the recommendation of friends," began the Professor.

"Who?"

"Friends of mine to whom your reputation is well known."

"Ah!"

"I have suffered a loss!"

"Yes?"

"Robbery, sir."

"Indeed."

The caller was not getting much help from the detective who was leaving the telling of the story wholly to the Professor.

"I have been robbed. As perhaps you are aware, I am occupying apartments in the Belvidere. I have a suite of rooms there. They were entered sometime during the day yesterday and a very valuable signet ring stolen."

"What was its value?" asked the detective.

"Its intrinsic value was not so great. Its sentimental value was very great. It was a present to me from our beloved ruler the Czar of All The Russias," added the caller devoutly almost as if he were speaking of a divine personage.

"Indeed, I can readily understand your regret at losing a gift so cherished."

"Yes, I regret its loss more than words can express. I would give any money that might be asked for its return."

"Have you appealed to the police?"

"Ah no, as in my own country we prefer to go to the secret police when affairs of this nature develop. I would that you recover the signet for me, for which I shall pay large money."

"I am rather too busy to take up so small a matter, sir," said Sleuth after a moment's thought. "However, in view of all the circumstances, if you really desire me to do so I shall try to recover your ring for you. Now tell me all the circumstances of its loss."

"There is little to tell. I left it in my desk upon retiring last night, I should say the night before last. Upon awakening the ring was missing."

"Servants?"

"Possibly, of the hotel, not of my own. My own are trusty."

"Was there any evidence that your apartments had been entered during the night?"

"None so far as observable."

"H-m-m-m, it looks as if it might have been mislaid to me."

"I have searched everywhere. Perhaps if Monsieur were to call he might learn something to his advantage."

"Ah!" thought the detective, "now we are getting

at the kernel in the nut. I am to call. For what reason? We shall find out."

"Will you do me that very great favor?"

"When do you wish me to call?"

"Let me see, my time is well taken up until, I believe about ten o'clock this evening. That would be rather late for you would it not?"

"Not at all. Shall I call soon after ten?"

"We shall say the half after ten if that will suit your arrangements. I would make the hour earlier were it possible to do so."

"That will answer very well so far as I am concerned. And now that you are here, Professor, I should like to consult you on a matter in which I have been somewhat interested from accounts read in the papers?"

"Professionally?"

"After a fashion, yes. It is in reference to Roger Bissell's death."

"Ah!"

"Perhaps you are not aware of the fact, but it is true, Roger Bissell and myself have been close friends from boyhood. We were boys at school together and we grew up to young manhood together. The world separated us after a time, but now and then we met. Imagine my regret and sorrow when I learned from the newspapers that Roger had passed away suddenly. I noticed from the papers that you were called into consultation. I asked the family physician through a friend, what had taken off Mr. Bissell, and the family physician frankly admitted that he did not know."

"Ah!" the dark, bulging eyes of the caller were fixed on the face of the detective as if the Professor would read him through and through, but he saw there only the concern of a man who had lost a valued friend.

"What would Monsieur ask?"

"As a matter of personal curiosity, I should like to know the nature of the ailment that carried my friend off so suddenly."

"Personal curiosity is your motive for asking?"

"It is."

"Nothing more?"

"We will call it by that name for lack of a better one."

"Then, I have nothing to say. I cannot answer your question without the consent of the surviving relatives. You see we physicians are as much bounden to secrecy as are you gentlemen in your calling."

"Oh, very well, it is immaterial," said the detective in a careless tone. "I have no doubt I can learn the cause if I ask, but it is not worth the trouble. It will not bring my friend back to life. To return to your own matters, I shall endeavor to be at your apartments at the time specified."

"Monsieur is very kind," said the Professor rising, the detective's words having indicated that the interview was at an end.

"Now, what on earth did he come here for?" muttered Old Sleuth as his caller left the house. "He did not come here to engage my services to find a lost ring. He has lost no ring. He lied like a gentleman when he made that statement. Well, we shall see."

CHAPTER XIV.

SLEUTH HAS ANOTHER CALLER.

Henry Loveland lost no time after the departure of his guest. The detective prepared himself for a cam-

paign of activity during the rest of the day. He felt that now he was on the right track and that the lines were slowly converging toward one common point. What that point would be he could not say, but he was able to make a pretty good guess.

The officer had not seen Miss Duncan in several days. There was nothing to report, hence had kept away from the home, not desiring to come in contact with Richard unless circumstances forced him to do so. Now there was added reason why he should not meet the young man until absolutely necessary.

The dinner hour had arrived when the detective returned to his home after a day spent in great activity, during which Sleuth had made rapid progress in his investigation. He had learned many facts, pieced many scattered threads together greatly to his satisfaction and regret as well, for he had learned some things that he was more than sorry to hear.

Arriving home he was met with the information that another caller was in the library. The detective hastened there finding a bronze-faced clear-eyed young man sitting by the window looking out. Sleuth had an opportunity to study the caller for a moment before his presence was revealed.

"You wished to see me, sir?" questioned the officer. The young man turned sharply then rose to his feet. "If you are Mr. Loveland the detective, I do want to see you!"

"I am he."

"Then I will introduce myself to you. My name is Howard Edson. You do not know me of course—"

"Do not be too sure about that. What can I do for you?"

"If you will be good enough to read the extra edition of the World this evening, I will go into details after you have finished."

Sleuth took the paper. Instantly his eyes rested on the headlines a flush of color surged into his cheeks before he could down the sudden emotion.

The gist of the article was that a well known young woman was missing from her home. A hat and some of her garments found floating on the North River led to the belief that she had been drowned, in fact it was assured that she had fallen into the water for the young woman herself had been seen and recognized on the edge of the river just off One Hundred and Tenth street, nearly at the foot of the street, the scene being overlooked by Riverside drive. The name of the young woman the papers said was Miss Muriel Duncan, the niece of the late Roger Bissell. The article further intimated that the young woman was suffering from temporary aberration over the loss of her uncle and that she had committed suicide. The body had not been found, though the river was being dragged under the supervision of the young woman's brother.

Old Sleuth did not speak until he had read the article to the end. He laid the paper down on the desk, then seated himself in his chair, lost in thought for the moment.

"Of course the article does not mean any more to you than hundreds of other similar ones do that are printed every year. It means a great deal to me."

"I understand fully what it means to you, Mr. Edson."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"Will you explain?" The young man's face was

calm, but the detective could see that a tempest was raging beneath the surface.

"I know that Miss Duncan was your affianced wife, that she was waiting for the usual period of conventional mourning to pass before she accepted you as her husband. You on your part were waiting until you felt that you could properly support a wife taken from her station in life."

Edson gazed at the detective in amazement.

"Am I right?"

"You are. I do not understand how it is possible that you know these things, but that you do know them I am free to admit."

"Wait a moment. I wish to make some inquiries along another line, after which I will join you."

Sleuth went to his telephone box in another room, calling up Mr. Proctor.

"You have heard?" asked the detective.

"About Muriel, yes."

"What do you think?"

"I am too dazed to think. Richard came to me late this afternoon in a great state of excitement. The boy was nearly beside himself. I will give him credit for that. The word had been brought to him of the finding of the garments. He identified them as belonging to Muriel the moment he set eyes upon them. Acting upon my advice he engaged me to drag the river."

"With no results?" asked Sleuth.

"None. The current is setting to the sea. The body no doubt will be carried out to sea. It is terrible."

"It is indeed. Is there anything that you wish me to do?"

"What can you do?"

"I do not know. I shall have to think the matter over first. I have a caller here this evening who is in deep distress."

"A caller?"

"Yes, Howard Edson."

"Oh, poor devil, I am sorry for him."

"So am I Proctor, for he is a fine type of young man. I don't know when I have seen a young fellow to whom I have taken a greater fancy. I will see you in the morning. If there is any news please call me up no matter what the time of the night may be."

"You may depend upon me to do so."

Old Sleuth hung up the receiver, returning to the library where Edson was waiting him impatiently.

"Now, Mr. Edson, we will talk. Tell me what I can do for you?"

"Will you first tell me how you come to know so much about my affairs?"

"I was not aware that I did."

"Your words would indicate that it was unnecessary for me to tell you anything."

"You have brought me a most astounding piece of news just the same. Now, let me ask you, do you believe that Miss Duncan is in the river?"

"Yes."

"You have good reason for thinking as you do, at least your words would imply as much."

"I have."

"What are your reasons?"

"Because I spent an hour with Muriel on Riverside drive this morning within a few rods of the spot where the clothing was found," was the startling answer.

"You spent some time with her there to-day?" asked the detective slowly.

"Yes."

"This is serious, young man."

"Why so?"

"Can you not guess?"

Edson shook his head.

"Because you will be brought into this affair."

"Brought into it?" repeated the young man in a puzzled tone.

"Yes."

"I do not understand."

"You will be brought into it because in all probability you were the last person to be with her before she went into the river. Do you see the point?"

"My God!" exclaimed Howard Edson in a horrified tone.

CHAPTER XV.

ON MYSTERY'S TRAIL.

"You don't mean that they could think that I—"
"No matter what they think. You will be called upon to state what you know. Do you know Miss Duncan's brother?"

The young man nodded.

"Are you friendly?"

"No. I do not like him. He hates me?"

"Why?"

"He knows of my love for his sister."

"How did he learn it?"

"He came upon us one evening in the library after the death of their uncle. I was kissing Muriel good night. Richard was in a towering rage. Of course there was nothing for me to do under the circumstances save to make a frank confession to him. I told him that I loved his sister, that she loved me, and that she had promised to be my wife when I was ready to make a home for her?"

"What did he say?"

"He ordered me from the house."

"Did you go there again?"

"No."

"How long ago was that?"

"A little more than a week."

"You have not been there since?"

"No, I have met Muriel outside nearly every day since that time. As she explained to me, the house belonged to her brother, and he had the right to forbid my going there if he wished to do so. Had the house belonged to her matters would have been different. Then she would have stood upon her rights, for Muriel was a determined girl."

"Yes, she was. Now what do you wish me to do?"
"Help me, find her body and I shall be under everlasting gratitude to you. I am far from rich, but every dollar I have is yours if you will aid me in this. I cannot bear to think of her being buffeted about in the swirl of waters churned and beaten by passing vessels and—"

Edson did not finish. He buried his head in his hands, uttering a long-drawn sob, that shook his frame from head to foot.

"My lad, whether you have money or not does not matter in this instance. Yes, I will help you. I will do what I can and it will cost you nothing—not a cent. Perhaps you on the other hand will be able to assist me in some inquiries that I am making. I will be frank

with you, feeling sure that you are to be trusted. If not, I am no judge of men."

"I am to be trusted," answered the young man simply.

"Then listen to what I am about to tell you."

"Yes."

The detective began the narration of his connection with the case from the time Duncan had sent for him, omitting, however, his suspicions in regard to the death of Mr. Bissell and the others that had followed. The story consumed the greater part of an hour. At its close Edson sat with bowed head thinking deeply.

"Do you think this robbery had anything to do with the trouble between Muriel and her brother?" he asked finally.

"I do not see how."

"Did Miss Duncan speak to you of any other disagreements between herself and her brother?"

"Nothing of a specific nature. I understood that they did not get along well together at any stage, differing on most questions."

"How was it before they came into their inheritance?"

"That is the peculiar part of it. All their trouble seemed to date from that point."

"H-m-m-m. Have you ever heard of a woman named or called the Countess Ritzkie?"

"No, I do not remember to have heard the name. Why?"

"It is immaterial. Have you ever seen the jewels that were lost?"

"I saw Muriel's jewels. She showed them to me quite recently."

"Would you recognize them if you saw them again?"

"I might. Yes, I am sure that I should recognize the more marked ones. For instance, there was the pear-shaped diamond, one of the most exquisite stones I have ever gazed upon."

"Have you a dinner engagement to-night?"

"No."

"I should very much like to have you dine out with me in that case."

"I am afraid I am not dressed for dinner," protested Edson.

"You are all right. Many men in business clothes go to the dining place where I shall take you to-night. That is one of the few democratic privileges remaining, one can dine almost anywhere in New York in a business suit. It is different in Europe."

"So I am told."

"Come, we have plenty of time. Let us walk up town. We can talk on the way up. First I shall have to telephone to cancel an engagement, if you will be good enough to wait."

"Certainly."

Sleuth called up Professor Hofsky, stating that circumstances over which he had no control made it necessary for him to cancel the engagement with the Professor for that evening, at the same time adding that he would call at the same time on the following evening if desired.

The learned Professor while expressing his regret, which was real, agreed to the postponement. Sleuth went to his private room where he changed his appearance somewhat, not wishing to be identified in his real character out dining with young Edson.

When the detective returned to the library Edson opened his eyes wide. He did not recognize the man before him, a man who appeared to be near his own age and build.

Sleuth noted his caller's surprise. The detective laughed.

"Excuse me, I should have told you. I have assumed a disguise—"

"You! Is it possible," gasped Edson.

"Yes, it is I indeed."

"Wonderful. I have often heard of detectives disguising themselves, but I never dreamed that it could be carried this far. I do not believe one of your own family would recognize you."

"Few are able to effectively assume a disguise. Most are clumsy failures."

"I can readily believe that. Are you going now?"

"Yes."

"I will tell you frankly, Mr. Loveland, that I do not feel much like dining out tonight under the circumstances, as you will no doubt understand without my telling you."

"I understand."

"I am going because you appear to wish me to do so. I believe that you have some motive in requesting me to accompany you, other than mere politeness."

"Right you are, my boy. You are sharp."

"It does not require an especially keen imagination to understand that."

The two men started from the detective's house, strolling slowly along the street among the throngs, discussing the case in which both were now so deeply interested. Sleuth kept a sharp lookout about them, noting every face that passed, bending a closer look on some one now and then that had attracted his attentions especially.

Mr. Loveland conducted his companion to one of the best hotels in the city. Edson glanced at the detective inquiringly.

"Do not be alarmed my boy. You are as much at home here as you would be in one of the ordinary hash parlors, and perhaps a great deal more so."

"Yes, that is true, only when I come to these places I usually am differently dressed."

"We will let that pass for the present. Remember, be on the watch should I give you a sign that the subject at heart is a dangerous one."

"You mean if we are liable to be overheard?"

"Exactly."

The detective made his way to a table well screened by plants and flowers. It was near a window, in fact directly beneath a window, and though the young man was unaware of the fact, Sleuth had chosen it with forethought.

They seated themselves as would any other diners have done, ordering their meal in the regular course of events.

"Now we are pleasantly situated and for the time being shall be free to discuss our troubles," said the detective with a smile.

There were troubles to follow that Howard Edson did not even dream of at that moment.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE PEAR-SHAPED DIAMOND.

"I do not feel much like pleasant conversation. I fear I shall be the death's head at the feast."

"Nonsense! You have no reason to feel utterly hopeless."

"You think not?"

"I am sure not."

"You mean something by that remark?"

"I usually do."

"What do you mean?"

"Now, don't be in a hurry, my dear boy, there is much to be considered before I speak more freely than I have done. Can you get away from your work for a couple of days?"

"Yes."

"Then arrange to do so. I may want to use you. Then again it is more than likely that you will be asked to appear before the coroner's inquest, in fact I think it would be an act of prudence for you to offer to do so. It would show that you had nothing to fear and that you were anxious to have the mystery cleared up."

"You advise me to do this?"

"I do."

"But I shall have to reveal matters that it will not be best to have the world know—I shall have to expose the skeleton in the Duncan family. I would rather die than do that."

"Not necessary at all. You can tell the truth as to all the material facts, even stating that Miss Muriel was troubled over some family matters of a personal nature, the exact details of which you did not hear, which will be the fact. I understand you to say that she spoke only in a general way of these difficulties."

"That is true."

"Then the way is clear."

"Shall I speak of my relations to her?"

"It would be best. That will be the explanation of the unusual meeting on Riverside Drive. Young women in her station do not meet gentlemen in this democratic manner unless perhaps they are engaged. It is not exactly considered good form, you know?"

"I understand. I shall do exactly as you say."

"You will be asked if you know of any reason that would or might have induced Miss Duncan to take her life. Of course you do not. Neither had there ever been the slightest breath of disagreement between you. She appeared to be in her right mind and in as good spirits as could be expected considering the loss of her uncle. This seemed to prey upon her mind. You understand?"

"Perfectly, from what you have told me, I think I shall be able to carry it off well. But is it all true?"

"So far as you are concerned Miss Muriel perhaps had been mentally upset by her uncle's death causing her much mental distress and perhaps driving her to take her life."

"You know better than that, Mr. Loveland, begging your pardon for so contradicting you. I am going to follow your advice explicitly, but it is a bald attempt to steer the inquest in the wrong direction."

Old Sleuth chuckled audibly.

"That is exactly what I want to do," was the remarkable statement.

For an instant suspicion shone in the eyes of the young man, then he smiled faintly, for he knew that some deeper motive than he knew was in the mind of the detective.

"You are playing a game, Mr. Loveland."

"I admit the charge," laughed the detective. "I

have to play many games in my profession—in the interest of justice you understand?”

“Of course.”

“Beyond that I have never committed a deceitful act in my life. When pitting oneself against criminals one has to adopt their methods to a large extent else one will fail miserably.”

“You suspect some deep laid plot in this affair?”

“There are wheels within wheels in this affair. It is more far-reaching than even you can dream, my boy. It is in the hope of landing the real criminals that I am working. If I succeed, which I shall, it will be a triumph for you and for me. By the way, do you see that very remarkable beauty four tables down to your right? Turn cautiously so that she may not see you regarding her.”

“Yes.”

“Well, I am going to cause her to look this way. You be looking up at the ceiling admiring the mural decorations which we shall be studying and discussing. When I put my foot on your toe, you will instantly lower your glance to her face, then for a brief instant permit your gaze to rest on a decoration that she wears about her neck.”

“You are going to make her look this way, you say?”

“Yes.”

“I should like to know how you expect to make her look around?” questioned Edson.

“Never fear, I shall do so as you will see, or rather you won’t see,” added the detective with a short laugh. “She will look up in the direction that we are gazing. That will be the time that you will get the pinch on your toe. Don’t look too long and permit her to see you gazing at her. It might defeat my purpose.”

“I shall try to obey orders.”

“Now we will begin our study of the decorations.”

Edson dutifully looked up toward the ceiling, apparently being very much interested in what he saw there. Old Sleuth did not take the same interest in the ceiling that did his companion. Instead the detective bent a keen, searching gaze on the beautiful woman dining with an escort a short distance from them.

“Unless I mistake not, the lady is dining with our old friend Baron Nitze. Their names are somewhat similar, but all those Russian names are,” said the detective to himself.

Edson supposed the detective was enjoying the mural decorations, but quite the contrary was the case.

All at once the young woman turned her head and looked straight at the two men. She did not meet the detective’s gaze for he appeared to be looking at the ceiling explaining something to his companion.

The woman raised her eyes instinctively to the ceiling.

Old Sleuth’s heel came down on the left toe of his companion.

The young man obeyed orders promptly. He permitted his glance to fall to the beautiful face before him.

Then he glanced at the white neck. About it in several strands was a hoop of finely wrought gold and a pendant.

Howard Edson gave a sudden start. Once more the detective’s foot came down.

“Look back!” came the sharp whispered command.

Reluctantly the young man turned toward the detective.

“Laugh, eat, boy, eat!” commanded Sleuth.

“I couldn’t eat at this moment if it were to save my life,” answered Howard.

“You must. Your face is ghastly. You will give yourself and me away. Buck up.”

With a strong effort of will Edson pulled himself together.

“That is more like. Now you are acting like the clever man you are. Do not turn. Our friend is looking at us inquiringly. I do not wish her to see your face under any circumstances.”

“She will not until you bid me turn.”

“That I shall not do. It were better to remain as you are. I will do all the looking that is necessary. I know how to look better than do you.”

“There can be no doubt about that.”

“You saw something that affected you rather strangely, Edson?” questioned Loveland.

The young man nodded, his face flushing vividly after its palor of a moment before.

“I knew you would. Do you mind telling me what you saw to so affect you?”

“Yes, but it is not necessary. You already know.”

“What did you see?” repeated the detective.

“I saw Muriel’s pendant—the pear-shaped diamond,” answered the young man in a faint voice.

CHAPTER XVII.

SLEUTH MAKES A QUICK MOVE.

“Ah! You are sure of this?”

“I am sure unless there are two in existence exactly alike. I do not believe it.”

“Nor do I.”

“Besides, the hoop about the neck, there cannot be the least doubt about that.”

“I thought you would recognize it.”

“Who is that woman?” demanded Edson.

“Easy. Not quite so emphatic. We may be overheard. Your voice has great carrying power. You want to know who the woman is. I will tell you. She is the woman I spoke to you about tonight. It is the Countess Ritzkie.”

“Ah!”

“Her companion is Baron Nitze, a well known Russian Nihilist. Whether he is real Baron or not I do not know, nor do I care. I guess the Russian Government has their eye on him. Some day he will turn up missing, unless—” Sleuth did not finish the sentence. He relapsed into deep thought, while his companion regarded him curiously.

“You are a strange man, Mr. Leonard,” breathed Edson.

“I have been called an old fogey,” answered the detective with a short laugh. “Our friend Duncan thinks I am a fool and a blackmailer. I had the pleasure of throwing him out of Mr. Proctor’s office a day or so ago. It was a most pleasant duty. My only regret was that I didn’t have the chance to knock the little upstart’s head off. I shall do it yet if he insults me again.”

“Let me take the job off your hands,” urged Edson.

“No, you can get in quite enough trouble of your own accord.”

The young man’s face sobered.

“You mean regarding the—”

“Yes.”

“I had almost forgotten it. You keep my head in a whirl.”

“And I am going to whirl it some more after a time. Do you think you can manage without me—that is can I trust you to follow my orders for the rest of the evening?”

“You know you can.”

“Very well. I am going to leave you soon. I may leave you rather more abruptly than you think is becoming to a host. However, the end you will understand, justifies the means.”

“I understand.”

“Here is the money with which to pay for the dinner—”

“I protest—”

“Remember you are here as my guest. Surely you will not protest under those circumstances.”

Edson was silent. Old Sleuth had laid a bill on the table, tucking it under the younger man’s plate.

“As I have said, you will pay the bill, but you will sit here sipping your coffee until you see evidences of departure at the third table.

“I will obey orders.”

“Show no surprise if I disappear suddenly, and now listen. When our friends at the third table get ready to move, you will be ready also to take your departure, only you will go first.”

“I understand.”

“Stop at the cigar counter. Be lighting a cigar just at the moment when the lady and her escort pass you. This in order that you may get a closer view of the jewel. Do not let your eyes dwell on it for more than a couple of seconds. If you wish, you may appear to be struck by her beauty. All women are flattered by that.”

“After that what then?”

“Whatever you wish, only make no attempt to follow them.”

“But, sir, if this is the jewel that Muriel lost—I am sure it is—why not arrest these people? Surely it is one of them who has stolen it?”

“That may all be true, but to arrest them now would be a great mistake. We should defeat our main purpose and lose the entire case. Do you understand?”

“No, but I shall. I understand that you are doing what is best—Shall I return home?”

“No, go to my rooms and remain there all night providing I do not return. Here, give this card to my servant who will answer your ring at the bell. He will give you the privileges of the house. Good luck, and don’t worry.”

“I could not very well help doing that, however, I shall do my best to get a little rest. You have encouraged me wonderfully and feeling that I may be of some service to you is more to me than you can dream.”

The eyes of the detective twinkled.

Edson looked up. A sudden thought had come to him.

“But about dragging for the body?” he whispered.

“That will be continued on the early morning. I have made arrangements for that. You need have no concern on that score. However, it is my idea that the proceeding is useless.”

“What do you mean by that?”

The detective avoided the question. He seemed lost in thought, eyes on the ceiling, hands lying listlessly on the table in front of him.

“As I said before, there are wheels within wheels. Had it ever struck you that there was anything peculiar about Mr. Bissell’s death?”

“No, sir, what do you mean?”

“It was quite sudden,” murmured the detective.

Edson regarded the detective steadily for a full minute, then the young man’s face grew a shade more pale.

“What do you mean to insinuate?” he whispered in a hoarse whisper.

“Insinuate? I do not insinuate.”

“Then what do you mean?”

“That you will have to think out for yourself. You will have plenty of time in which to do so during the evening after I have left you. For the present we will drop the subject, as I see the moment is approaching when I shall have to leave you. Make yourself thoroughly at home in my place, and nose into anything you think will interest you, being careful, of course, that you do not get mixed up with any of the electrical arrangements of the house.”

“What do you mean?”

“You might get a bad shock, even with your knowledge of the electric current.”

Edson smiled.

“So that is the way you protect yourself is it?”

“One of the ways,” corrected the detective with an answering smile.

The young man laughed.

“You are a wonderful man—”

“The time for action has arrived. Look at the mural decoration again.”

Edson obeyed. As he turned his eyes, the detective shot a quick glance about the room, then placing one hand on the window sill at his side, vaulted through the window with marvelous skill and lightness.

Edson turned to address a word to his companion, but the word died on his lips. Where Old Sleuth had sat but a few seconds before there now stood an empty chair. Not a sign of the detective was to be seen anywhere about. So utter and thorough had been the officer’s disappearance that he might have sunk through the floor.

Edson gasped, rubbed his eyes and gazed about him. Then bethinking himself of what Sleuth had said the young man glanced about him to make sure that he was not observed, then took a quick look under the table.

No Old Sleuth was there.

“Am I dreaming?” muttered Edson. “This is the most wonderful thing that ever came to me. God! I must get out of here. My head is swimming.”

Just then the diners at the third table began to gather up their effects preparatory to leaving. Edson, mindful of the orders that had been given him, quickly rose from the table making his way leisurely toward the cigar counter near the exit of the restaurant. He wanted to look around, but by an effort, restrained his curiosity. He was stealing himself to meet the eyes of the woman who wore Muriel’s jewel, without giving himself away.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FALLING TO A SHADOW.

Young Edson carried out his part of the programme almost with the skill of an experienced detective.

When the Countess swept past him, casting a languorous glance in his direction she saw a well dressed,

genteel young man gazing at her with open admiration in his eyes. The beautiful woman permitted the suspicion of a flush to appear in her cheeks, then her long lashes drooped under his steady gaze, as she swept from the place.

"I reckon I did that pretty well," muttered Edson. "Yes, it is Muriel's diamond," he added with darkening face. "I could have torn it from her white throat."

He restrained himself with an effort of will from rushing out and doing that very thing now. He did not know that a pair of keen eyes were watching his every movement—the eyes of the great detective, Old Sleuth.

Giving the woman and her escort sufficient time in which to take their departure, Edson sauntered out in a careless manner, stood for a moment in front of the entrance to the restaurant, then strolled aimlessly down the street smoking a cigar.

In the meantime a shadow had been lurking near the entrance. When the Countess and her companion entered a coupé and were rapidly driven away, the shadow stepped into a hansom and with a wave of the hand to the driver, took his seat. The chase was an easy one, leading to the better residential section of the city.

Suddenly Sleuth saw the coupé ahead of them slow down. The detective tapped on the window of his hansom, whereat the vehicle came to a sharp stop. Sleuth alighted, paid the driver, then sauntered slowly down the street toward the place where the Countess was leaving her own carriage.

The woman's companion stood talking with her for some few moments, then with an audible good-night, reentered the coupé and was rapidly driven away.

From the opposite side of the street the officer saw the woman let herself into the house with a latch key. He understood that she was occupying the apartments of a family who had left for the country for the summer. All this he had learned during his wanderings about town in search of information along the lines he had laid down. The detective leaned against a stairway a few doors from the house aimlessly switching his boots. To all appearances he was waiting for some one to emerge from the house in front of which he was standing.

The watcher was possessed of great patience. An hour had passed, during which he had not changed his attitude or position. Then his patience was rewarded.

A man came hurrying along the street, pausing as he reached the house into which the Countess had passed. After satisfying himself that no one was observing him the man hurried up the steps and went through the motion of ringing the bell. Whether he did or not, the detective was in doubt. At least the officer decided that the move was but a blind. At any rate the man had but a moment to wait before he was admitted.

Some moments were permitted to pass, the officer retaining his former position which he had taken after the disappearance of the man in the house of the Countess.

"The time has arrived," mused the detective. "Time somehow always does come around if one has patience to wait for it. Time will accomplish all things, but frequently we haven't the patience to wait for it to do its work, and as a result we fail miserably. Sometimes we fail when we do wait for it."

Old Sleuth walked along close to the building line,

as close as the brown stone steps would permit. All at once he darted up the steps, following the way the man had just gone. He halted just within the outside vestibule doors where he stood crouching and listening with ear pressed to the keyhole.

The house was as silent as a tomb for all the sound he could hear. Still the officer did not change his position. He had the patience the stolidity of an Arab when necessary to wait. Fifteen minutes passed, then a pick lock was quietly inserted in the door lock. A faint click told the story. The tumblers had responded to the delicate touch of the master of locks.

At the same time Sleuth had caught the door knob. He did not open the door at once, but held the knob so that the tumblers should not slip back into place again, thus relocking the door.

Some moments passed, during which the officer's ears were attuned to catch the slightest sound.

At last he pushed the door open ever so little, peering into the dimly lighted corridor. It was a handsome corridor, one of those only possible to the rich, filled with valuable rugs and skins, while along the sides of the reception hall stood pieces of statuary and huge figures in armor, or what appeared to be figures in armor. As a matter of fact there were no figures in the ancient armor.

The detective looked along the row. One midway down the hall he discovered stood half open at the back, where the armor is secured to the wearer.

"Ah, the gentleman has forgotten to close the house," grinned the detective. "I shouldn't care to be obliged to wear that outfit especially in warm weather. However—"

Passing along the corridor on velvet feet he glanced into one after another of the drawing rooms, but all appeared to be vacant. Still further on he came to the library. Instinctively he felt that someone was sitting there, but as yet the detective did not deem it prudent to peer into the open doorway from which the curtains had been removed.

"Some one is in there, and it is my opinion that it is the caller waiting for the Countess. Ah!"

The rustle of skirts somewhere above him verified the detective's deductions. He was all at once conscious that he was between two fires, the caller in the library on the one hand and the Countess probably descending the staircase at that moment, on the other.

Old Sleuth was never at a loss for a remedy. He had not burned his bridges behind himself by any manner of means. He was prepared for just such an emergency, though he had not formed the plan in advance.

Darting back right in the direction from which the Countess must approach, the detective cautiously slipped into the open armor of a long dead, long forgotten knight of old.

"I am a knight in earnest," grinned the detective. "That was a bad pun but it goes. Ah, there comes the Countess."

Countess Ritzkie had discarded her elaborate dining robe, having put on in its place a soft, clinging lounging gown, that twined about her figure in graceful folds. The watching detective could but admire the queenly pose of the woman's head, the stately walk and the general poise of the body, bespeaking a long line of proud ancestors.

"She is a countess indeed," he murmured. "No

one could assume those queenly airs save one to the manor born."

The woman swept by him without so much as turning her head. He saw her pause at the door of the library, glancing within. Old Sleuth saw something else too. An expression of revulsion swept over the beautiful pale face as the Countess stood framed in the doorway.

"She sees something that is unpleasant to her," muttered the figure in the armor. "That may mean one of two things, either she loathes the man or else his actions have displeased her. I wonder who he is? The street light was so uncertain that I was unable to make him out. However I shall know soon."

The Countess disappeared within the library, leaving the officer puzzled as to what his next move should be. He could not hear what was being said in the library nor could he see. He had about decided to leave his hiding place and venture up to the library door, when his problem was solved without his assistance.

The Countess and her caller emerged from the drawing room, she leading the way, heading straight for the place where the disguised detective was in hiding. At first he decided that she had discovered him in passing and that she was bringing the caller to attend to the intruder.

The couple's next move decided the question for the detective without any effort to do so on his own part.

CHAPTER XIX.

A STORY WITHOUT WORDS.

The detective was watching them narrowly.

The Countess and her companion halted before the knight in armor, she motioning to a richly carved hall seat directly opposite to the detective's hiding place.

Old Sleuth chuckled. He understood her purpose now.

"It is cooler now, better for your heated brow," announced the Countess sarcastically.

Sleuth did not give so much heed to the words. His eyes were fixed on the face of the man.

"Count Olaf," he muttered. "The great Russian patriot for whom all the sleuths of the Russian Government are looking and yet are unable to identify." The detective shuddered.

"Those fellows have a few things to learn in sleuthing. I reckon I have a lad who could beat them all blindfolded. However."

The officer gazed long and searchingly. There was that about the face of the Count that was strangely familiar to the intruder, but for once in his life Old

Sleuth was baffled. He could not call to mind where he had seen a face that in any way strongly resembled the one before him. The face was pale and emotionless, but the eyes shown with a strange brilliancy.

The watcher noted that the eyes of the Countess, on the contrary, were dull and lifeless. Her expression said that she had resigned herself to the scent that was to follow.

Her companion having seated himself, she drew her skirts closely about her, taking a seat at the far end of the settee occupied by Count Olaf, as if she would not have her skirts so much as touch him.

The Count smiled a sarcastic, glittering smile.

He addressed the woman in Russian. She answered him in the same language, then a perfect volley of words passed between them in their native tongue.

"Confound the luck!" muttered the detective. "And I do not understand a word of Russian."

All his trouble it would appear, had been for naught. He had risked much to be present at an interview that he had felt sure would tell him many things of great moment, and now that the interview was taking place he could not understand a word of it.

Old Sleuth was angry.

Suddenly he pulled himself together.

"At least, I am student of human nature enough to be able to read facial expressions. Yes, I will forget that they are speaking and will watch the play of their emotions as pictured on their faces."

Bending every nerve to the task the detective fixed his eyes first on one then on the other of the speakers. He saw that the woman was protesting angrily.

"She is in love with him," nodded the watcher. "Yes, she is upbraiding him for something he has done that is displeasing to her. I wish I knew what it was. However, I can only watch and wait."

The interview continued with more or less heat on the part of the Countess, with cool sarcasm on the part of the Count. He was insolently tolerant of her tirade, listening easily until the first burst of her passion had passed.

"A jealous woman," nodded the detective. "He spurns her torrent of words, her objections. Now what is it that he has done that she is so terribly upset about? It can be nothing more or less than another woman in the case. Yes, that is the colored man in the fence, and she has searched him—I should say her—out."

When the Countess had finished, the man turned toward her. The smile had left his face, the lines of the latter narrowing down sharply, cruelly, the detective decided.

"Now he is driving home his arguments, he is laying down an alternative."

This was apparent for the face of the woman went deadly pale.

"A threat," muttered Old Sleuth. "The devil. He would murder her if she carried out her own expressed purpose of interfering with the plans he is attempting to carry out. Ah!"

At that juncture the Count had drawn from his vest pocket a tiny nickled tube, about the size of a quill toothpick. From this he calmly drew a cap, exposing a tiny point.

Reaching out quickly for the woman's hand he thrust the metal tube toward it.

Sleuth's hand was on his revolver.

"The scoundrel—no, he does not intend to murder her now. He is simply frightening her."

The woman had drawn back uttering a little scream. Her face was livid with fright and rage.

The Count made believe to grab for the hand a second time.

The Countess leaped to her feet, one hand thrust into her bosom. The light of murder blazed in her eyes.

With a harsh laugh, Count Olaf recapped the nickle tube, replacing it in his waist coat pocket. But the movement had acted like an electric shock on the old detective hidden in the knightly armor.

"Is it possible?" muttered the officer. "Still—what connection can he have with the other? Ah, it is the revolutionary cause that binds this man and the other—the cause of Holy Russia. Yet, I do not understand what they have to gain. But I shall have it, I shall fathom the mystery, the motive, and when I do, then will there be—"

The detective's meditations were interrupted by the Count's rising. He was about to depart. The man first turned to the woman. There was no smile on his face now. He was laying down certain rules for her guidance, hammering them in with gestures from a long, artistic finger with which he was tapping the back of the seat on which he had been sitting.

The Countess was listening with stony face and lowered eyes. She heard, but the iron had entered her soul and as the detective saw it was a wronged and vindictive human being who was listening to the man.

"In a battle of wits between the two I'd lay odds on the woman," muttered the officer. "She will kill him one of these days unless I am greatly mistaken. Perhaps that will save both the Russian Government and myself an unpleasant job. However—"

The Count strode toward the door, the Countess following him half way down the hall, then halting.

For a full five minutes after the closing of the front door behind the caller, the woman stood like a beautiful white statue in the middle of the long corridor, the eyes of the detective fixed upon her.

As if feeling the magnetism of his gaze, Countess Ritzke turned slowly, her eyes traveling uneasily

about the corridor, finally resting for a brief moment on the armor within which the detective was hidden.

He dropped his eyes with a muttered imprecation at his own carelessness. The Countess turned slowly and walked toward the library. Sleuth saw that she was making a great effort to keep from giving away to tears.

The instant the woman disappeared in the library, the old detective slipped from his hiding place and followed her.

A moment later the detective stood framed in the doorway of the library.

CHAPTER XX.

A MOMENTOUS INTERVIEW.

The Countess sat at a broad mahogany desk in the center of the room, one elbow resting on the desk, head pillowed in hand.

She had not yet discovered the intruder who stood as silent as a statue, with eyes fixed upon her.

The Countess sighed, raised her eyes slowly. She paused as they rested on the face of the detective. It was a pleasant, a manly face that she found herself gazing upon, a face to attract any woman, especially one of an emotional turn of mind.

For a moment neither spoke.

Suddenly the detective found himself looking along the barrel of a revolver that glistened menacingly in the subdued light of the library.

"Who are you?" demanded the Countess without a tremor in her voice.

"I am a friend."

"Friends do not enter houses secretly at dead of night without invitation."

"That depends upon the necessities of the moment. I am your friend and I will prove it if you will but give me the chance."

"Why are you here?"

"To do you a great service."

"I am not in need of your kind offices."

"Oh, yes you are."

"Will you be good enough to explain—And, sir, remain where you are. Another step forward and you will be shot. I am a dead shot."

"I am glad to know it," smiled the detective.

"How so?"

"In the hands of an ordinary woman, I should fear a revolver. I might get hurt. That you are trained in the use of it is a source of keen satisfaction to me. I know that I am safe."

The face of the Countess relaxed into a smile.

"You are bold and clever," she said.

"Thank you. Will you permit me to sit—here on this side of the room where I may speak with you face to face?"

The woman considered the proposition, examining the face of her caller keenly.

"I assure you that you have nothing to fear from me. No woman ever had cause to complain that I did not respect her sex."

"Be seated!"

"You may put down the weapon. Had I wanted to defend myself I could have shot you ere you drew the weapon. I knew where you kept it."

The woman's eyes sought to read the identity of her strange caller. She failed to do so.

"Will you be good enough to tell me how you entered this house?"

"In the usual way, through the front door."

"How?"

"By myself."

"For what purpose?"

"Merely to have a confidential talk with you."

"Supposing I should summon the police, which I can do by a pressure of the button here on the desk?"

"Yes."

"You would be arrested. Perhaps you are a burglar."

"If such is your opinion why not press the button?"

A white hand shot out, hovering for an instant over the electric button, then was slowly withdrawn, while the other hand laid the revolver to one side within easy reach.

Old Sleuth smiled as he observed the movement.

"Now, sir my future actions will depend upon yourself. Somehow I cannot but believe that you are a gentleman."

"Thank you. I am so when it is possible to be. There are occasions when perhaps a different view might be taken of the matter. However, I have come here to talk with you."

"Then why not have come in a more conventional manner?"

"Because the present method suited my purposes better."

"Did you see a man leave this house before you entered?"

"No, madame."

The detective had spoken truthfully. The Countess sighed a sigh of relief at the announcement.

"Now say what you have to say to me in the briefest possible time. The hour is late and I am weary, besides it is not fitting that a lady should receive callers at this late hour."

"That was my reason for entering unannounced. As you request I will come at once to the point. You are in distress."

"Distress?" repeated the woman.

"Yes."

"Of what nature?"

"You are torn with jealousy because of the faithlessness of another whom you love with a wild, all-consuming love."

The Countess flushed. Then she laughed, but there was neither mirth nor sincerity in the laugh.

"Monsieur jests."

"Madame knows better."

"Of whom am I jealous?"

"For the sake of the argument supposing we refer to the gentleman as the Count."

This time the face of the Countess paled.

"What do you know of my affairs?"

"I know perhaps more than you would think. I perhaps may be able to help you in your present distress, providing you will in turn assist me."

"In what manner may I assist you?"

"By giving me certain information."

"Ah, then you are a spy?"

"Honest people need have no fears of so-called spies. I do not admit that I am a spy. I do admit that I am here in your house for the purpose of strengthening some information that I already have, as well as the obtaining of certain other facts that I do not possess. In turn I can make you a promise."

"What promise will you make me?"

"The Count shall never possess the young woman whom he would cast you over for."

The woman started as if under the force of an electric shock while a deep color surged to her cheeks, mounting to her forehead.

"Sir, what do you mean?" she demanded, one hand instinctively creeping toward the silver mounted revolver that lay glistening in the light of the electroliers.

"You understand what I mean, Madame. I mean what I say that the Count shall never possess that which he covets."

"How will you prevent?" asked the woman unwittingly giving herself away, as the detective put it to his own mind.

"By one means or another. He may possibly be prosecuted as a criminal and—"

"Never!" cried the woman. "I would die sooner than permit a thing like that. Man or devil, whatever you may be, know now, know once and for all that I love him, that—"

The passion suddenly died out of her face as she fixed her brilliant eyes on those of the man before her.

"Very well, then let justice take—let your Count wed the woman whom he claims to love better than one to whom he should bow down to in humility and thankfulness—yourself."

The eyes of the Countess softened.

"Ah, who can resist—no, no, I will not!"

CHAPTER XXI.

A COUNTESS PERSUADED.

"Perhaps I may tell you something that will assist you in making up your mind to do as I request. As surely as you sit there, the Count will wed this woman by fair means or foul. No, you cannot reach her until the hour is too late. Kill her if you will, but even then you shall not possess the man for reasons which I need not state."

"I will not, I will not!"

"Then perhaps on your own part you will turn over to the rightful owners the pear-shaped diamond and the other trinkets that you have locked in your strong box," answered Old Sleuth suggestively.

The woman eyed him steadily. Her self-possession was wonderful under the circumstances.

"Ah, you are a detective?"

"You may so call me if you wish."

"What is your name?"

"I do not choose to tell you."

"Ah, you are indeed he whom they call Sleuth. I know, I know."

"What makes you think that?"

"So the Count has said—"

"I thought so," snapped the detective as the woman cut her words short. "So, he knows. I begin to understand."

So long as he could keep the woman talking, the old detective was well satisfied, no matter what was said, for out of it he was drawing fresh information by deduction, piecing together certain facts that he had gathered during the last few days.

"Do you know where the woman is staying?"

She nodded.

"You have been to see her?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"You should know. It were impossible."

"I will be frank with you. I do not know, Countess. It is one of the things I have to ask of you, to tell me the whereabouts of the woman. The rest may be safely left to me."

"You are here in her interest?"

"Yes."

"Wholly so?"

"Principally."

"What other motive has led you to visit me here at this hour of the night?"

"Motives having to do with this case. You have the diamonds. You know very well what position you are in. Besides there are agents of your home government who would give much to know what I know of you and your affairs."

Again the Countess flushed.

"You need have no fears on this score. I am not so base as to do a thing like that, bad as I may be. Now

what is it to be, Countess, will you make a clean breast of all that you know about this affair, or shall I be under the necessity of placing you under arrest for having stolen gems in your possession, not to speak of the possibility of other and more grave charges being laid against you?"

"What do you mean by the inference?"

"It is unnecessary to be more specific. Needless to say that after puzzling over a resemblance for a long time, I have discovered who Count Ritzkie is. Shall I tell you?"

"No!" almost whispered the woman.

"Are you aware of the other crimes that have been committed?"

"Crimes?"

"Yes."

"What is your meaning, Monsieur?"

"I know why you are here and what is being done by the Secret Board of the holy order, but I will be frank enough to say that I do not believe that your order has sunk low enough to engage in a series of wholesale murders?"

"Murders?" gasped the woman.

"Yes."

"What mean you, sir?"

"There have been murders committed here, Countess, for the furtherance of the cause of Holy Russia—murders of innocent victims and—"

"Who?" Her face was white and set.

Old Sleuth wrote the names of certain persons on a slip of paper which he handed to her, perhaps for greater effect.

The Countess reeled as if she would fall fainting to the floor.

"But how, how?" she almost screamed. "Surely it cannot be laid at his door?"

"Did you not flee from the same peril almost within the hour?"

"What mean you?" demanded the woman in an awed whisper.

"The needle's point," answered the old detective in a low voice.

"God! Can this be true?" almost screamed the woman.

"Yes."

"Not even for Holy Russia would I countenance a thing so horrible! No, it cannot be true."

"It is true. Your own judgement will tell you that, it will tell you how all this has been accomplished and it will tell you more—"

She looked the question that remained unuttered on her lips.

He nodded.

"It will tell you that you have been a willing tool for one who professed to love you, but who when you

have served his purpose will no doubt carry out the threat that he made in the corridor to you this very night. Had he attempted it tonight he would have dropped dead at your feet. Madame I should have killed him where he sat. Even then my weapon was covering his heart. Like yourself, my shots never miss. Do you believe that I am your friend now, Countess?"

For several minutes the woman held the eyes of the detective in a steady gaze.

"Yes," she answered simply, lowering her glances. "I see many things now that I did not see before."

"Will you tell me all then?"

"But whatever I may say to you will be used against me?"

"No. Your connection with the affair shall never be known either to your enemies nor to your friends. Before the storm breaks you will have received warning and fled, do you understand?"

She nodded.

"I will charge myself with seeing to that. In the meantime you must use care that you do not expose yourself. Your attitude must be the same as before toward certain persons, both toward the Count and toward the young man with whom you occasionally dine. You see my information is wide, Countess."

"You are a most wonderful man, Monsieur. Will you let me think?"

"As long as you wish. Pardon, but might I light a cigarette while you are deciding upon the course you will follow? I do not wish to influence you. Use your own best judgment in the light of what has been said here this evening both between ourselves and between yourself and the man who threatened to take your life."

With a gesture she indicated that her guest was to smoke, whereat Old Sleuth lighted up, finding much solace and companionship in the white smoke rings as they ascended ceilingward.

Neither by word nor gesture did he interrupt the train of deep thought that the Countess was lost in. She seemed far away, her face growing even more pale than was its wont under the extreme mental effort which she was exerting.

At last she looked up.

"You have promised to protect me. I believe you. So far as the woman is concerned, I will tell you all. I will add other facts, but what my attitude toward a certain other man may be, I cannot promise at this time. I should keep my word were I to promise."

"Do nothing rash, Countess, I pray you. There are many opportunities for you in the world and with your beauty and brilliancy you could almost have that world at your feet."

The smile she gave the old detective was a brilliant one.

"Monsieur is a courtier. I promise. I will tell all that I know save as refers to the cause which I am bounden by solemn oath never to reveal."

"Proceed," said the detective.

CHAPTER XXII.

CONCLUSION.

The detective and the countess talked for nearly two hours after which Old Sleuth took his departure, the beautiful woman accompanying him to the door, bidding him good bye with a firm clasp of the hand.

Sleuth hurried to his own lodgings where he found young Edson asleep.

"Come, we are going on a short journey. Are you prepared for a little rough housing if the occasion demands?"

"Yes, I am ready for anything."

"Good, I think I shall have a surprise for you before the night is over and that will not be so long, for it soon will be daylight."

The two men entered an automobile and were quickly driven up town, whence the car wheeled out into the country keeping the Hudson River in sight all the way along. They eventually drove into a grove of evergreens where a grey stone building shone out in strong relief against the somber background in the moonlight.

Bidding his companion wait the detective entered, having left orders that the chauffeur and Edson were to enter providing they heard a whistle from the detective's whistle.

Half an hour passed, after which Sleuth came forth a pleased smile on his face. He led young Edson into the building, passed down a corridor, then shoved the young man into a small reception room.

Howard Edson found himself standing face to face with Muriel Duncan. She was pale but smiling.

"I promised you a surprise young man, you have it. I've landed you in an insane asylum."

The young people were in each other's arms the next second, the detective discreetly withdrawing until their meeting had been concluded.

Soon after that all hands returned to the city. On the following day, Sleuth closed in on the lines. Young Duncan had been the tool of the revolutionists. He had agreed with the nihilists to pay over to the cause the sum of half a million dollars when his uncle should have died as it was promised he would. The young man had bound himself to them by the indiscreet signing of a contract so that he was held fast and hard. Then came more trouble. Demands were made upon him for further funds under the threat of exposure, until he had been forced to steal the heirlooms belonging to his sister, as well as giving up the precious Red Ruby. Muriel had been kidnapped at the instigation

of the Count in whose heart there burned a mad passion for her.

Dick Duncan was a ruined man. His weakness had led him to be an active participant in a murder. This had been committed in reality by Count Olaf who was no other than Ivan Hofsky. He had been the means of removing many human beings from the earth by the merest prick of the needle in his little nickled case, this needle being tipped with a deadly Oriental poison. It was arranged in each instance that the patient should be given a harmless medicine by the family conspirator, then after a time the great healer should be called in consultation. While in the presence of the family he held the hand of the victim, he delivered the deadly thrust.

Count Olaf was arrested by the police, but despite the old detective's warning the Professor had turned the needle's point against himself and he was dead before the day was done.

Old Sleuth in the meantime had cornered Dick Duncan in the library of the Duncan home where the young man was accused of the crime and a full statement of his connection with it made. Sleuth was sorry, deeply grieved that this terrible scandal came upon Muriel. For the young man he had no sympathy, nothing but loathing.

"I'll tell you what I should do were I in your place, Duncan. I should step into my private room there and blow my brains out. You aren't worth the expense your public execution would be to the people. Unfortunately I as an officer of the law cannot countenance anything of the sort. I wish I weren't an officer, I'd turn my back and let you do it."

"You won't have to turn your back. I for one shall not die on the Needle's point, nor in the chair."

There was a sudden report. The young man fell forward over his desk, his life's blood rushing from a wound over the heart. The Needle's Point had failed to end a disgusting life, but the ready pistol had done the work well.

There is little more to be told. Miss Duncan and young Edson were quietly married two months after the occurrences narrated in this chapter. Countess Ritzkie fled to Russia, her complicity with the case, really an innocent complicity, never was known. Old Sleuth accepted no pay for his work on the case, saying that he was in need of the practice. But he was the one favored guest at the wedding of the brilliant young couple when they sealed their life's vows.

THE END.

The next issue will be

Old Sleuth Weekly, No. 172

Entitled

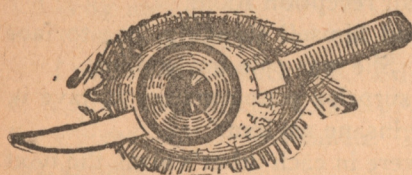
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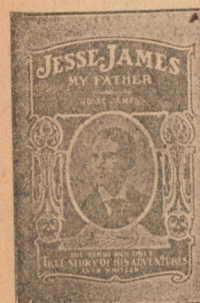
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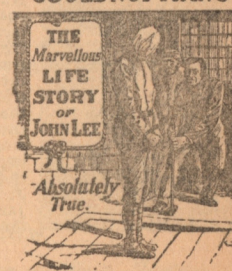
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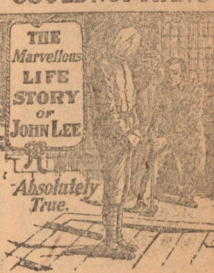
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|--------------------|--|
| No. 1 May 17th. | DRIVEN FROM HOME by Horatio Alger, Jr. |
| No. 2 May 24th. | JACK'S WARD by Horatio Alger, Jr. |
| No. 3 May 31st. | THE STORE BOY by Horatio Alger, Jr. |
| No. 4 June 7th. | SAM'S CHANCE by Horatio Alger, Jr. |
| No. 5 June 14th. | GRIT, THE YOUNG BOATMAN OF PINE POINT by Horatio Alger, Jr. |
| No. 6 June 21st. | SHIFTING FOR HIMSELF by Horatio Alger, Jr. |
| No. 7 June 28th. | FACING THE WORLD by Horatio Alger, Jr. |
| No. 8 July 5th. | BRAVE AND BOLD by Horatio Alger, Jr. |
| No. 9 July 12th. | TOM, THE BOOTBLACK by Horatio Alger, Jr. |
| No. 10 July 19th. | DO AND DARE by Horatio Alger, Jr. |
| No. 11 July 26th. | THE CASH BOY by Horatio Alger, Jr. |
| No. 12 Aug. 2nd. | HECTOR'S INHERITANCE by Horatio Alger, Jr. |
| No. 13 Aug. 9th. | THE YOUNG ADVENTURER, or Tom's Trip Across the Plains. |
| No. 14 Aug. 16th. | THE YOUNG SALESMAN. |
| No. 15 Aug. 23rd. | TONY, THE TRAMP, or Right is Might. |
| No. 16 Aug. 30th. | ADRIFF IN NEW YORK, or Tom and Florence Braving the World. |
| No. 17 Sept. 6th. | PAUL, THE PEDDLER, or The Fortunes of A Young Street Merchant. |
| No. 18 Sept. 13th. | PHIL, THE FIDDLER, or The Story of A Young Street Musician. |
| No. 19 Sept. 20th. | SLOW AND SURE, or From the Street to the Shop. |
| No. 20 Sept. 27th. | JULIUS, THE STREET BOY, or Out West. |
| No. 21 Oct. 4th. | IN A NEW WORLD, or Among the Gold Fields of Australia. |
| No. 22 Oct. 11th. | BOUND TO RISE, or Up the Ladder. |
| No. 23 Oct. 18th. | RISEN FROM THE RANKS, or Harry Walton's Success. |
| No. 24 Oct. 25th. | HERBERT CARTER'S LEGACY, or The Inventor's Son. |

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